

BOOK EXCERPT

YOU DON'T HAVE TO RIDE JIM CROW

Raymond O. Arsenault*

*You don't have to ride jim crow,
You don't have to ride jim crow,
Get on the bus, set any place,
'Cause Irene Morgan won her case,
You don't have to ride jim crow.*

–1947 freedom song¹

When Irene Morgan boarded a Greyhound bus in Hayes Store, Virginia, on July 16, 1944, she had no inkling of what was about to happen—no idea that her trip to Baltimore would alter the course of American history. The twenty-seven-year-old defense worker and mother of two had more mundane things on her mind. It was a sweltering morning in the Virginia Tidewater, and she was anxious to get home to her husband, a stevedore who

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1. Bayard Rustin Files, box 51, Fellowship of Reconciliation Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania [hereinafter FORP]. The lyrics for “You Don’t Have to Ride Jim Crow” were co-written by Bayard Rustin, Johnny Carr, Donald Coan, Doreen Curtis, and A. C. Thompson at the FOR/CORE-sponsored Interracial Workshop in Washington, D. C., on July 7, 1947. The music was an adaptation of the traditional Negro spiritual “There’s No Hidin’ Place Down Here.” The epigram is the second stanza. See also the documentary film, *You Don’t Have to Ride JIM CROW!* (New Hampshire Public Television, 1995), produced and directed by Robin Washington. Narrated by Judge A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., the film chronicles the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation.

worked on the docks of Baltimore's bustling inner harbor. Earlier in the summer, after suffering a miscarriage, she had taken her two young children for an extended visit to her mother's house in the remote countryside near Hayes Store, a crossroads hamlet in the Tidewater lowlands of Gloucester County. Now she was going back to Baltimore for a doctor's appointment and perhaps a clean bill of health that would allow her to resume work at the Martin bomber plant where she helped build B-26 Marauders. The restful stay in Gloucester—where her mother's family had lived and worked since the early nineteenth century, and where she had visited many times since childhood—had restored some of her physical strength and renewed a cherished family bond. But it had also confirmed the stark realities of a rural folk culture shouldering the burdens of three centuries of plantation life. Despite Gloucester's proximity to Hampton Roads and Norfolk, the war had brought surprisingly few changes to the area, most of which remained mired in suffocating poverty and a rigid caste system.

As Irene Morgan knew all too well, Baltimore had its own problems related to race and class. Still, she could not help feeling fortunate to live in a community where it was relatively common for people of "color" to own homes and businesses, to vote on election day, to attend high school or college, and to aspire to middle-class respectability. Despite humble beginnings, Irene herself had experienced a tantalizing measure of upward mobility. The sixth of nine children, she had grown up in a working-class black family that had encountered more hardships than luxuries. Her father, an itinerant house painter and day laborer, had done his best to provide for the family, but the difficulty of finding steady work in a depression-ravaged and racially segregated city had nearly broken him, testing his faith as a devout Seventh-Day Adventist. Although a strong-willed mother managed to keep the family together, even after one of her daughters came down with tuberculosis, hard realities had forced Irene and several of her brothers and sisters to drop out of high school long before graduation. As a teenager, she worked long hours as a laundress, maid, and babysitter. Yet she never allowed her difficult economic circumstances, or her circumscribed status as a black female, to impinge on her sense of self worth and dignity. Bright and self-assured, with a strong sense of right and wrong, she was determined to make her

way in the world, despite the very real obstacles of prejudice and discrimination. As a young wife and mother preoccupied with her family, she had not yet found the time to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or any other organization dedicated to racial uplift. But in many ways she exemplified the “New Negro” that the NAACP had been touting since the 1930s. Part of a swelling movement for human dignity and racial equality, she was ready and willing to stand up—or, if need be, sit down—for her rights as an American citizen.²

The Greyhound from Norfolk was jammed that morning, especially in the back where several black passengers had no choice but to stand in the aisle. As the bus pulled away from the storefront, Morgan was still searching for an empty seat. When none materialized, she accepted the invitation of a young black woman who graciously offered her a lap to sit on. Later, when the bus arrived in Saluda, a county seat town twenty miles north of Hayes Store, she moved to a seat relinquished by a departing passenger. Although only three rows from the back, she found herself sitting directly in front of a white couple—an arrangement that violated Southern custom and a 1930 Virginia statute prohibiting racially mixed seating on public conveyances. Since she was not actually sitting next to a white person, Morgan did not think the driver would ask her to move. And perhaps he would not have

2. Baltimore *Afro-American*, January 26, 1946; New York *People's Voice*, June 15, 1946; Aleah Bacquie (Irene Amos (Morgan) Kirkaldy's granddaughter), interview by author, October 9, 2003. Irene Amos (Morgan) Kirkaldy, interview by Sherwood Morgan, January 4, 2004; Sherwood Morgan, interview by author, January 3, 2004. Prior to emancipation in 1865, several generations of Irene Morgan's ancestors worked as slaves on the Tabb plantation in Gloucester County. Box II-B190, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [hereinafter NAACPP], contains numerous documents related to Irene Morgan and the 1946 United States Supreme Court decision *Morgan v. Virginia*. See especially “Opinion by Justice Herbert B. Gregory,” typescript, June 6, 1945; “Argument in Irene Morgan Case,” undated typescript; “Irene Morgan, Appellant vs. Commonwealth of Virginia . . . Brief of Appellee,” undated typescript; and “Virginia Goes A’Courtin’,” *Headlines and Pictures* (May 1946): 15. On the racial situation in Baltimore during the 1940s, see the papers of the Baltimore Branch of the NAACP, box C77, NAACPP; and the extensive coverage in the Baltimore *Afro-American*. For brief accounts of the Morgan incident, see Catherine A. Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow: The Desegregation of Southern Transit* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 45; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 237–238; Jack Greenberg, *Race Relations and American Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 118–119; and Carol Morello, “The Freedom Rider a Nation Nearly Forgot,” *Washington Post*, July 30, 2000, A1, A16.

done so if two additional white passengers had not boarded the bus a few seconds after she sat down. Suddenly, the driver turned toward Morgan and her seat mate, a young black woman holding an infant, and barked: "You'll have to get up and give your seats to these people." The young woman with the baby complied immediately, scurrying into the aisle near the back of the bus. But Irene Morgan, perhaps forgetting where she was, suggested a compromise: she would be happy to exchange seats with a white passenger sitting behind her, she calmly explained, but she was too weak to stand for any length of time. Growing impatient, the driver repeated his order, this time with a barely controlled rage. Once again Morgan refused to give up her seat. As an uneasy murmur filled the bus, the driver shook his head in disgust and rushed down the steps to fetch the local sheriff.³

Irene Morgan's impulsive act—like Rosa Parks's more celebrated refusal to give up a seat on a Montgomery bus eleven years later—placed her in a difficult and dangerous position. In such situations, there were no mitigating circumstances, no conventions of humanity or even paternalism that might shield her from the full force of the law. To the driver and to the sheriff of Middlesex County, the fact that she was a woman and in ill health mattered little. Irene Morgan had challenged both the sanctity of segregation and the driver's authority. She had disturbed the delicate balance of Southern racial etiquette, endangering a society that made white supremacy the cornerstone of social order.

The sheriff and his deputy showed no mercy as they dragged her out of the bus. Both men claimed that they resorted to force only after Morgan tore up the arrest warrant and threw it out the window. According to the deputy's sworn testimony, the unruly young woman also kicked him three times in the leg. But Morgan herself later insisted that propriety and male pride prevented him from telling what really happened. "He touched me," she recalled in a recent interview. "That's when I kicked him in a very bad place. He hobbled off, and another one came on. He was trying to put his hands on me to get me off. I was going to bite him, but he was dirty, so I clawed him instead. I ripped his shirt. We were both pulling at each other. He said he'd use his nightstick. I said,

3. Baltimore *Afro-American*, January 26, 1946; Morello, "The Freedom Rider a Nation Nearly Forgot"; Bacquie, Kirkaldy, and Morgan interviews.

‘We’ll whip each other.’” In the end, it took both officers to subdue her, and when she complained that they were hurting her arms, the deputy shouted, “Wait till I get you to jail, I’ll beat your head with a stick.” Charged with resisting arrest and violating Virginia’s Jim Crow transit law, she spent the next seven hours slumped in the corner of a county jail cell. Late in the afternoon, after her mother posted a \$500 bond, she was released by county authorities confident that they had made their point: no uppity Negro from Baltimore could flout the law in the Virginia Tidewater and get away with it.

As Morgan and her mother left the jail, Middlesex County officials had good reason to believe that they had seen the last of the feisty young woman from Baltimore. In their experience, any Negro with a lick of sense would do whatever was necessary to avoid a court appearance. If she knew what was good for her, she would hurry back to Maryland and stay there, even if it meant forfeiting a \$500 bond. They had seen this calculus of survival operate on countless occasions, and they didn’t expect anything different from Morgan. What they did not anticipate was her determination to achieve simple justice. “I was just minding my own business,” she recalled many years later, “I’d paid my money. I was sitting where I was supposed to sit. And I wasn’t going to take it.” The incident in Saluda left her with physical wounds, but it did not diminish her sense of outrage or her burning desire for vindication. As she waited for her day in court, discussions with friends and relatives, some of whom belonged to the Baltimore branch of the NAACP, brought the significance of her challenge to Jim Crow into focus. Her personal saga was part of a larger story—an ever-widening struggle for civil rights and human dignity that promised to recast the nature of American democracy. Driven, as one family member put it, by “the pent-up bitterness of years of seeing the colored people pushed around,” she embraced the responsibility of bearing witness and confronting her oppressors in a court of law.⁴

4. Baltimore *Afro-American*, January 26, 1946; New York *People’s Voice*, June 15, 1946 (first quotation); Bacquie, Morgan, and Kirkaldy interviews; Morello, “The Freedom Rider a Nation Nearly Forgot,” (second and third quotations). According to Morgan’s brother-in-law, James Finney, Morgan’s mother, Ethel Amos, was a key supporter of her daughter’s fight for justice. “Irene’s mother deserves a lot of credit in this,” Finney told Virginia Gardner of the *People’s Voice*, “. . . her mother got to work and raised the money

On October 18, Morgan stood before Middlesex County Circuit Judge J. Douglas Mitchell and pleaded her case. Although she represented herself as best she could, arguing that Virginia's segregation laws did not apply to interstate passengers, the outcome was never in doubt. Pleading guilty on the resisting arrest charge, she agreed to pay the \$100 fine assessed by Judge Mitchell. The conviction on the segregation violation charge was, however, an altogether different matter. To Mitchell's dismay, Morgan refused to pay the \$10 fine and court costs, announcing her intention to appeal the second conviction to the Virginia Supreme Court. Adamant that she had been within her rights to challenge the driver's order, she vowed to take her case all the way to Washington if necessary.⁵

Morgan's appeal raised more than a few eyebrows in the capital city of Richmond, where it was no secret that the NAACP had been searching for suitable test cases that would challenge the constitutionality of the state's Jim Crow transit law. Segregated transit was a special concern in Virginia, which served as a gateway for southbound bus and railway passengers. Crossing into the Old Dominion from the District of Columbia, which had no Jim Crow restrictions, or from Maryland which, unlike Virginia, limited its segregationist mandate to local and intrastate passengers, could be a jarring and bewildering experience for travelers unfamiliar with the complexities of border-state life. This was an old problem, dating back at least a half century. But the number of violations and interracial incidents involving interstate passengers had multiplied in recent years, especially since the outbreak of World War II. With the growing number of black soldiers and sailors and with the rising militancy of the Double V campaign, which sought twin victories over enemies abroad and racial discrimination at home, Virginia had become a legal and cultural battleground for black Americans willing to challenge the dictates of Jim Crow.

to make bond for Irene when she decided to appeal her conviction in the lower court." Gardner added that "at the time the elderly woman took up the cudgel in her daughter's case, Irene had no attorney, no advisers." New York *People's Voice*, June 15, 1946.

5. "Opinion by Justice Herbert B. Gregory," and "Irene Morgan, Appellant vs. Commonwealth of Virginia—Brief of Appellee," box II-B190, NAACPP. Morello, "The Freedom Rider a Nation Nearly Forgot"; Kirkaldy and Morgan interviews. In Virginia the official name of the state supreme court is "The Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia."

The struggle was by no means limited to the Virginia borderlands, of course. All across the South segregated buses, trains, and streetcars provided blacks with a daily reminder of their second class status. As early as 1908 a regional survey of the “color line” by the journalist Ray Stannard Baker had revealed that “no other point of race contact is so much and so bitterly discussed among Negroes as the Jim Crow car.” And this was still true thirty-six years later when Gunnar Myrdal, the author of the monumental 1944 study *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, observed “that the Jim Crow car is resented more bitterly among Negroes than most other forms of segregation.” From Virginia to Texas—where Lieutenant Jackie Robinson faced a wartime court martial for refusing to move to the back of a bus—segregated transportation facilities, including terminal waiting rooms and lunch counters, remained an indelible though not uncontested fact of Southern life. During the early and mid-1940s, the NAACP received hundreds of complaints about the indignities of Jim Crow transit, and reports of individual challenges to the system were common throughout the black press.⁶

NAACP attorneys, both in Virginia and in the national office, knew all of this and did what they could to chip away at the legal foundations of Jim Crow transit. But they were frustrated by their inability to attract the attention of the United States Supreme Court. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the cornerstone of the “separate but equal” doctrine that had sustained segregationist law since 1896, had validated a Louisiana segregated coach law. And

6. Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow*, 3–4, 10, 14, 18, 44–47; Spottswood Robinson, “Memorandum Covering Transportation Cases,” c. January 1945, box II-B190, NAACPP; Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line: American Negro Citizenship in the Progressive Era* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 31 (quotation); Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), 635 (quotation); Jules Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 59. The incident took place near Fort Hood, Texas, on July 6, 1944. Although the military police and the base provost marshal sided with the bus driver who ordered Robinson to move, a military court ruled in Robinson’s favor in August 1944. On the special character of race relations and racial politics in mid-20th-century Virginia, see J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). For a sense of the frequency of confrontations related to Jim Crow transit during the early and mid-1940s, see reels 67, 73, 77, 81, 87, 91, 95–96, and 100, Tuskegee Institute Race Relations Clipping File (Microfilm) [hereinafter TIRRCF].

through the years the Court had been reluctant to revisit the issue in any fundamental way. In 1910, with former Ku Klux Klansman Edward White of Louisiana serving as Chief Justice, the Court ruled in *Chiles v. Chesapeake and Ohio Railway* that state segregation laws could be applied to interstate passengers. Four years later, in *McCabe v. Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad*, the Court showed some openness to the argument that black travelers had a legal right to equal accommodations, citing the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment and rejecting the railroad's argument that the paucity of black travelers requesting Pullman sleeping berths justified the absence of black accommodations on Pullman cars. But this tantalizing decision only served to divert attention from the underlying reality of racial separation. According to Catherine Barnes, the leading historian of transit desegregation, for the next three decades "Southern blacks attempted only to equalize accommodations, not to undo segregation."⁷

During the 1920s and early 1930s, when conservative Republicans dominated the Court, few NAACP attorneys questioned this pragmatic strategy. But from the mid-1930s, the increasingly liberal "Roosevelt" Court encouraged a reformulation of the organization's approach to the interrelated problems of racial discrimination and segregation, especially in cases involving segregated transit. In 1941, the campaign for equal travel accommodations finally brought a measure of victory in *Mitchell v. Arkansas*—a unanimous decision that affirmed Illinois congressman Arthur Mitchell's claim to the same first-class service accorded white travelers. Thurgood Marshall, William Hastie, and other NAACP legal theorists were convinced that the practice of applying state laws to interstate passengers was especially vulnerable to legal challenge. Citing the Interstate Commerce Clause and *Hall v. DeCuir*—a long-forgotten 1877 decision that, ironically, had invalidated a state law *prohibiting* racial segregation among interstate steamboat passengers—they felt confident that they could persuade the Roosevelt Court to restrict legally mandated

7. Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow*, 16 (quotation), 2–19, 22–23; *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896); *Chiles v. Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company*, 218 U.S. 71 (1910); *McCabe v. Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company*, 235 U.S. 151 (1914). For an excellent summary of the *Plessy* decision, see Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 73–83.

segregation to intrastate passengers. This strategy called for a reversal of the 1910 *Chiles* decision, and allowed the NAACP to move forward without risking defeat by a premature reconsideration of *Plessy*. Since pushing the Court too fast or too far would almost certainly lead to a setback for the cause of civil rights, a careful and cautious selection of test cases was essential. To counter the inertial presumptions of law based on precedent, the NAACP needed the right defendant in the right place at the right time.⁸

In 1942, the state legal committee of the Virginia NAACP, led by three Howard University-trained attorneys—Spottswood Robinson, Oliver Hill, and Martin A. Martin—began the search for a case that would bring the interstate issue before the Court. Working closely with Marshall and the national legal staff, the committee considered and rejected a number of potential clients before discovering Irene Morgan in the fall of 1944. Almost immediately, they sensed that this was the case and the defendant they needed. Not only was the basis of her conviction clear, but she also had the makings of an exemplary client. She was young, attractive, articulate, and, judging by her poised performance in Saluda, strong enough to withstand the pressures of a high-profile legal battle.⁹

With Thurgood Marshall's blessing, the Virginia NAACP filed a carefully-crafted appellate brief emphasizing the Interstate Commerce Clause and *Hall v. DeCuir*. But, as expected, the seven justices of the Virginia Supreme Court unanimously affirmed Morgan's conviction. In a rambling sixteen-page opinion issued on June 6, 1945, the court upheld the constitutionality of the 1930

8. Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow*, 1–2, 5–7, 14–44; Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 73, 77, 105–226, 238; “Argument in Irene Morgan Case,” NAACPP; *Hall v. DeCuir*, 95 U.S. 485 (1878); *Mitchell v. United States*, 313 U.S. 80 (1941). See also Joseph R. Palmore, “The Not-So-Strange Career of Interstate Jim Crow: Race, Transportation, and the Dormant Commerce Clause, 1878–1946,” *Virginia Law Review* 83 (November 1997): 1773–1817.

9. Spottswood W. Robinson III to Thurgood Marshall, January 11, 1945, and Thurgood Marshall to Spottswood W. Robinson III, January 15, 1945, folder 1, box II-B190, NAACPP; Robinson, “Memorandum Covering Transportation Cases”; Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow*, 44–45; Mark V. Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law: Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court, 1936–1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72–73; Carl T. Rowan, *Dream Makers, Dream Breakers: The World of Justice Thurgood Marshall* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 106; Juan Williams, *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary* (New York: Random House, 1998), 145.

Jim Crow transit law, reiterating the wisdom and legality of segregating all passengers, regardless of their origin or destination. Speaking for the court, Justice Herbert Gregory did not deny that *Hall v. DeCuir* established a legal precedent for invoking the Commerce Clause as a barrier to state statutes that interfered with interstate commerce. But he summarily dismissed the NAACP's claim that the 1930 law involved such interference. "Our conclusion," he declared at the end of the opinion, "is that the statute challenged is a reasonable police regulation and applies to both intrastate and interstate passengers. It is not obnoxious to the commerce clause of the Constitution."¹⁰

Gregory's forthright words were just what the NAACP wanted to hear. With a little help from the Virginia Supreme Court, *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* had become a near perfect test case. When the Virginia court denied the NAACP's petition for a rehearing in September, Spot Robinson could hardly wait to file an appeal to the United States Supreme Court. In January 1946, the Court agreed to hear the case, and two months later Robinson joined Marshall and Hastie for the oral argument in Washington. Even though he was the NAACP's leading authority on segregated transportation law, Robinson could not actually argue the case because he was not yet certified to appear before the Court. But during the argument he sat at the table with Marshall and Hastie. Although this was the first time that the NAACP had argued a segregated transit case in front of the Court, the organization's talented team of attorneys made short work of Virginia Attorney General Abram Staples's predictable arguments on behalf of the status quo. Focusing on the Virginia statute's broad reach, they argued that forcibly segregating interstate passengers violated the commerce clause, infringed upon congressional authority, and threatened the nation's tradition of free movement across state lines. Insisting that this misuse of state segregation laws placed an unnecessary and unconstitutional burden on individuals as well as interstate bus companies, the NAACP gave the Court a compelling rationale for overruling the Virginia court's judicial and racial conservatism. "Today, we are just emerging from a war in which all of the people of the

10. *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, 184 Va. 24, in *Virginia Reports* 184 (Richmond, 1946), 39.

United States were joined in a death struggle against the apostles of racism,” the NAACP brief reminded the justices. Surely it was time for the Court to declare that federal law no longer sanctioned “disruptive local practices bred of racial notions alien to our national ideals, and to the solemn undertakings of the community of civilized nations as well.”¹¹

Since this was essentially the same Court that had struck down the Texas “white primary” electoral system in the *Smith v. Allwright* decision of April 1944, NAACP leaders were cautiously optimistic. But in the unsettled atmosphere of postwar America, no one could be certain how the Court would rule—or how white Americans would respond to an NAACP victory over Jim Crow transit. 1946 had already brought a number of surprises, both bitter and sweet, ranging from the brutal repression of black veterans in Columbia, Tennessee, to the signing of Jackie Robinson by the Brooklyn Dodgers. Although change was in the air, it was not entirely clear which way the nation was headed on matters of race. Two years earlier, in the wake of the Texas decision, Marshall had urged delegates to the national NAACP convention to accelerate the pace of the movement for civil rights. “We must not be delayed by people who say, ‘The time is not ripe,’” he had declared, “nor should we proceed with caution for fear of destroying the status quo. People who deny us our civil rights should be brought to justice now.” It was in this spirit that he had encouraged his Virginia colleagues to file the *Morgan* appeal. But now, as he nervously awaited the Court’s ruling, he could not help wondering if he had acted precipitously. Adding to his nervousness was the knowledge that Staples, Virginia’s sharp-tongued attorney general, had never lost a case in nine appearances before the Court.¹²

11. “Argument in Irene Morgan Case,” “Irene Morgan, Appellant, vs. Commonwealth of Virginia—Brief of Appellee”; Richard E. Westbrooks to Thurgood Marshall, June 15, 1945; Memorandum to Mr. Wilkins from Thurgood Marshall, November 28, 1945; Clifford Forster (ACLU) to Marian Perry, January 10, 1946; “Memorandum for Bulletin on Irene Morgan Case”; Earl B. Dickerson (National Bar Association) to Thurgood Marshall, February 5, 1946; “Virginia ‘Jim-Crow’ Law Argued Before Supreme Court: Decision Pending,” NAACP Bulletin, March 28, 1946, all in box II-B190, NAACPP. See also Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow*, 45–46; Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 73–75; Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 238 (quotation); Williams, *Thurgood Marshall*, 145–146; and Rowan, *Dream Makers, Dream Breakers*, 106.

12. *Smith v. Allwright*, 321 U.S. 649 (1944); Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 234–238, 237

When the Supreme Court announced its decision on June 3, 1946, Marshall was both relieved and elated. With only one dissenting vote—that of Harold Burton, a former Republican Senator from Ohio appointed to the Court in 1945—the justices sustained Morgan’s appeal. In a carefully worded opinion delivered by Associate Justice Stanley Reed, a Kentucky Democrat who had spoken for the Court in *Smith v. Allwright*, six justices (in June 1946, the recent death of Chief Justice Harlan Fiske Stone and the assignment of Associate Justice Robert Jackson to the Nuremberg Trials had reduced the size of the Court to seven members) accepted the NAACP’s argument that segregating interstate passengers violated the spirit of the Interstate Commerce Clause. “As there is no Federal act dealing with the separation of races,” Reed explained, “we must decide the validity of this Virginia statute on the challenge that it interferes with commerce, as a matter of balance between exercise of the local police power and the need for National uniformity in the regulations for interstate travel. It seems clear to us that seating arrangements for the different races in interstate motor travel requires a single uniform rule to promote and protect national travel.”

The ruling affirmed the NAACP’s claim that the Virginia statute requiring segregation of interstate bus passengers was unconstitutional. But the opinion, cast in narrow terms, said nothing about intrastate passengers, its applicability to other means of conveyance such as railroads, or how and when desegregation of interstate buses might be implemented. And it offered

(quotation); Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 74–75, 99–115. On the Columbia, Tennessee crisis, see Gail O’Brien, *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). On the significance of Jackie Robinson in the immediate postwar era, see Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment*; Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1997); and Randy Roberts and James Olson, *Winning Is the Only Thing: Sports in America Since 1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 25–45. For a perceptive analysis of the political context of the racial crosscurrents of the mid-1940s, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 133–275; and Patricia Sullivan, “Southern Reformers, the New Deal, and the Movement’s Foundation,” in Armistead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan, eds., *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 81–104. See also John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 330–532; and Robert J. Norrell, *The House I Live In: Race in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138–144.

no clear sign that the Court was moving closer to an outright rejection of the *Plessy* doctrine of separate but equal. As a *Time* reporter put it, “This week seven nimble Justices ducked the racial question and settled everything on the basis of comfortable traveling.” None of this surprised Marshall and the other NAACP attorneys, who had maintained modest expectations throughout the *Morgan* proceedings. For the time being, they were satisfied that, in their first appearance before the Court on a segregated transit issue, pragmatic reasoning had given them a solid victory. In the aftermath of the decision, their greatest concern was not with the narrowness of the ruling but rather with the prospects of enforcement by Federal and state authorities. As with all legal controversies involving social mores or public behavior, the true value and meaning of the decision would depend on the reactions to it.¹³

On June 4, the *Morgan* decision was front-page news throughout the nation, and by the end of the day the NAACP’s national office was flooded with congratulatory telegrams. Many hailed the *Morgan* decision as a legal milestone comparable to *Smith v. Allwright*. But NAACP officials knew that praise from friends and allies, however welcome, was less important than the responses of editors, reporters, public officials, and bus company executives. Marshall and his colleagues hoped for the best, but no one was surprised when the press coverage followed racial, regional, and political lines, offering a wide range of explanation and speculation about the decision’s probable impact on segregated travel. In the black press, the headlines and stories tended to be expansive and even jubilant, suggesting that *Morgan* represented a landmark decision. In the major dailies of the Northeast, Midwest, and West, most of the coverage was favorable but restrained. In the white South, with few exceptions, editors and reporters downplayed the significance of the Court’s ruling. Anyone

13. *Morgan v. Virginia*, 328 U.S. 373 (1946); Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 236–238; Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 217, 220–224; “Question Ducked,” *Time* 47 (June 10, 1946): 23. Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow*, 47, notes that “Chief Justice Harlan Fiske Stone had been prepared to dissent in *Morgan*. Because he died on April 22, 1946, before the decision was handed down, his views were not made public, but in conference, the Chief Justice had maintained that racial seating on buses was a predominantly local matter which the states could regulate.”

who scanned the pages of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *New York Times*, and the *Birmingham Post-Herald*, for example, would have come away with more questions than answers. Had the Court issued a minor legal clarification that would affect a few border-state travelers in northern Virginia? Or had it struck a major blow against Jim Crow? In the days and weeks following the decision, no one could be sure.¹⁴

In this atmosphere of confusion and conflicting signals, most politicians, North and South, laid low. Former Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes and the ex-governor of New York, Herbert Lehman, lauded the decision; and Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a black Democrat representing Harlem, called *Morgan* “the most important step toward winning the peace at home since the conclusion of the war.” But the rest of the political establishment, from President Truman on down, had little or nothing to say about the Court’s ruling. Even in the Deep South, the political response was muted. One exception was Mississippi congressman Dan McGehee who insisted the decision proved that “the Supreme Court judges are a bunch of mediocre lawyers with no judicial training, and limited experience in the practice of the law.” In “taking away the rights of the States of this great republic to regulate the affairs within their borders,” he added, “they did so unmindful of the trouble and bloodshed that may be caused in the future.” Foreshadowing the attacks on Chief Justice Earl Warren following the 1954 *Brown* school desegregation decision, McGehee called for judicial impeachment proceedings “against each and every one of those who have handed down such decisions.”¹⁵

In the immediate aftermath of the *Morgan* decision, most of the public officials in a position to implement the ruling adopted a

14. Folder 1, box II-B190, NAACPP, contains numerous clippings, press releases, and congratulatory telegrams related to the *Morgan* decision. See also the clippings in reel 96, TIRRCF; and the *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 8-July 27, 1946.

15. “National Leaders Hail Supreme Court Decision on Jim Crow Buses,” press release, typescript, June 10, 1946; and Telegram, Adam Clayton Powell to Walter White, June 6, 1946 (quotation), both in folder 1, box II-B190, NAACPP; *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 15, 1946 (McGehee quotation). An editorial in the *Washington Post*, June 10, 1946, noted that Rep. Powell “had introduced a bill to abolish Jim Crow practices in interstate transportation a year and a half ago.” In the wake of the *Brown* decision, billboards calling for Warren’s impeachment were a common sight along the major highways of the Deep South.

wait-and-see attitude. Though clearly worried about the days ahead, NAACP leaders initially regarded this restraint as a hopeful sign. “Despite intemperate attacks . . . by a few professional southerners,” executive secretary Walter White announced on June 5, “we have indications [an] overwhelming majority of southerners will approve and abide by [the] decision.” As time passed, however, it became increasingly clear that the vast majority of Southern officials had no intention of facilitating the desegregation of interstate bus passengers. Stanley Winborne, North Carolina’s utilities commissioner, admitted that the “regrettable” decision would require bus companies to “halt the practice of Jim Crowing” on interstate runs. But officials in other parts of the South were not so sure. Speaking for the Louisiana Public Service Commission, Clayton Coleman vowed that segregation among intrastate passengers “will continue to be enforced” and that even among interstate passengers no racial mixing would be allowed until the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) validated the *Morgan* ruling. Alabama governor Chauncey Sparks castigated the decision as “fertilizer for the Ku Klux Klan” and as an unconstitutional interference with states’ “rights to conduct their internal affairs.” In Georgia, gubernatorial candidate Eugene Talmadge, one of Dixie’s most notorious racial demagogues, claimed that, regardless of the justices’ intentions, the ruling could be easily nullified. Under his plan, black passengers passing south through Georgia would “have to get off 50 feet from the Florida line and buy another ticket,” which he insisted “would make them intrastate passengers and outside the protection of the decision.” Mississippi governor Thomas Bailey expressed his defiance in simpler terms: “Segregation will continue down here. Neither the whites nor the Negroes want it any other way.”¹⁶

Tentative and often conflicting responses of bus company executives compounded the confusion. In the wake of the decision, some companies promptly ordered the desegregation of interstate

16. Telegram, Walter White to a long list of political and civil rights leaders, June 5, 1946 (quotation), folder 1, box II-B190, NAACPP; *Chicago Defender*, June 15, 1946 (Winborne, Coleman, Sparks, and Bailey quotations); *Baton Rouge State-Times*, June 4, 1946; *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 15, 1946 (Talmadge quotation); Barnes, *Journey From Jim Crow*, 50–51. On Talmadge’s racial demagoguery, see William Anderson, *The Wild Man from Sugar Creek: The Political Career of Eugene Talmadge* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975).

buses, others all but ignored the decision, and still others waffled. In several cases, desegregation orders were issued but later reversed after state officials pressured executives to maintain traditional arrangements. Since there were no counter-pressures from the Interstate Commerce Commission or the Justice Department, the sense of urgency and the likelihood of actual desegregation soon faded. By mid-summer, there were few signs of progress and a growing realization among civil rights advocates that the *Morgan* decision was a paper tiger. Strict segregation remained the norm on the vast majority of interstate buses, and the number of racial incidents related to interstate travel actually increased. Fueled by unmet expectations, complaints and misunderstandings multiplied, particularly in the Upper South. The result was bewilderment and frustration among interstate travelers, on buses—and on trains, where there was uncertainty about the ruling’s applicability.¹⁷

All of this left the NAACP in a legal and political bind. The initial trumpeting of the decision placed Marshall and his colleagues in an “awkward position,” according to the legal historian Mark Tushnet. Scaling down their expectations, “the legal staff had to urge Walter White to make it clear how limited the victory was,” something White did not want to do. By late-summer, NAACP attorneys had concluded that Justice Reed’s opinion was far more problematic than they had realized in the heady days immediately following the decision. As Tushnet has written, “*Morgan* cast doubt on Northern antidiscrimination statutes, which the NAACP surely could not have welcomed. And, by apparently leaving decisions about passenger seating to carriers themselves, *Morgan* drew the NAACP in the direction of attempting to devise a constitutional challenge to decisions by private operators of buses rather than decisions by state legislatures.”

In other words, the decision lost most of its meaning when the primary defense of segregation no longer involved “state-action,” the activating principle of the Fourteenth Amendment. Marshall, Robert Carter, and other NAACP legal theorists tried

17. *Chicago Defender*, June 15, 1946; Baltimore *Afro-American*, June 15–July 27, 1946; Barnes, *Journey From Jim Crow*, 52–53, 62–65; Robert G. Dixon, Jr., “Civil Rights in Transportation and the ICC,” *George Washington Law Review* 31 (October 1962): 198–213.

to devise a new strategy that would attack privately-enforced segregation, but their deliberations proved unsuccessful. As Carter later confessed, they didn't "know just how to proceed in this type of situation." In the end, they retreated to a political strategy of lobbying Congress for legislation outlawing private discrimination and of applying "extra-legal . . . pressures to get the carriers to abolish their private rules and regulations requiring segregation of the races." What this really meant, of course, was that the end of Jim Crow travel was nowhere in sight.¹⁸

Immediately following the *Morgan* decision, the NAACP's victorious legal strategy drew praise from a wide variety of civil rights activists, including Morgan herself. Having left Baltimore for New York City, where she found work as a practical nurse, Morgan expressed confidence that the Court's decision would "abolish jim crow for northerners going south." "Jim-crow tension has been removed by the edict," she proclaimed, "and the insult and degradation to colored people is gone." Unfortunately, the situation looked much different two months later. Segregated transit, with all its insults and degradation, remained firmly in place; Morgan herself was all but forgotten; and the leadership of the NAACP was ready to move on to new challenges. Despite their disappointment, Marshall and his colleagues were not about to let the *Morgan* case disrupt their long-term plan to dismantle the legal structure of Jim Crow. After more than a decade of careful legal maneuvering, they remained committed to a patient struggle based on the belief that American constitutional law provided the only viable means of achieving civil rights and racial equality. Confident that they were slowly but surely weakening the legal foundations of prejudice and discrimination, they were determined to press on in the courts.¹⁹

18. Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 75–76 (quotations); Barnes, *Journey From Jim Crow*, 62–65; Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 2212–25. Robert L. Carter to Daniel E. Byrd, June 12, 1946, folder 1, box II-B190, NAACPP, expresses Carter's early suspicion that "the bus companies' rules and regulations requiring segregation, apart from state statutes, are not affected by the Morgan case. Where such rules are inaugurated, as we expect them to be, we will have to go to court in an attempt to have them set aside as being unreasonable and invalid." Robert L. Carter, interview by author, March 8, 2005.

19. Carter interview; Baltimore *Afro-American*, June 15, 1946 (quotation); "Virginia Goes A' Courtin'," 15, claimed that Morgan was having "domestic problems" during the spring of 1946: "In April she left her service job and her husband who works as a maintenance man in one of Manhattan's less swanky apartment houses." New York *People's*

Within the NAACP, some local activists—especially in the Youth Councils—felt constrained by this narrow, legalistic approach. But their restlessness had little impact on the organization's national leaders, who maintained tight control over all NAACP activities. Alternative strategies such as economic boycotts, protest marches, and picketing were anathema in the national office, which saw itself as the guardian of the organization's respectability. In the midst of the Cold War, NAACP leaders did not want to do anything to invite charges of radicalism or subversion. Even though the NAACP prided itself on being a militant organization, public association with direct action tactics or with groups that might be termed "red" or even "pink" was to be avoided at all costs. In the Cold War context such caution was understandable, but in a number of instances, including the *Morgan* case, it placed severe limits on the NAACP's capacity to represent the interests of black Americans. Other than counseling patience, the nation's largest civil rights organization had no real answer to the white South's refusal to take *Morgan* seriously.²⁰

In the fall of 1946, the NAACP's disengagement from the fading, unresolved controversy over the *Morgan* decision created an opening for the radical wing of the civil rights movement. Though no one realized it at the time, this opening represented an important turning point in the history of the modern American freedom

Voice, June 15, 1946. At the time of the decision, she was employed "as a practical nurse for the children of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Wolff, writers, 70 Haven Ave." On Marshall's unshakable commitment to the NAACP's legal and constitutional civil rights strategy during the 1940s, see Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*; 67–136; Williams, *Thurgood Marshall*, 145–166; and Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 214–314.

20. Williams, *Thurgood Marshall*, 167–169; Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 190–191; Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1994), 190, 205–206, 210–211; Carter interview. On the NAACP youth councils and other sources of direct action advocacy within the NAACP, see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 105–147; Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: Wiley, 1998), 50–51, 93; and Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), xi–xx, 110–111, 272–283, 296, 407–408. On the NAACP and anti-Communism, see Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964); Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 9, 49, 53, 61–62, 138, 156–157; and Kenneth R. Janken, "From Colonial Liberation to Cold War Liberalism: Walter White, the NAACP, and Foreign Affairs, 1941–1955," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998): 1074–1095.

struggle. When the NAACP fell by the wayside, a small but determined group of radical activists seized the opportunity to take the desegregation struggle out of the courts and into the streets. Inspired by an international tradition of nonviolent direct action, this response to segregationist intransigence transcended the cautious legal pragmatism of the NAACP. In the short run, as we shall see, their efforts to breathe life into the *Morgan* decision failed. But in the long run, their use of direct action in the late 1940s planted the seeds of a larger idea that bore remarkable fruit a decade and a half later. Although called a “Journey of Reconciliation,” this nonviolent foray into the world of Jim Crow represented the first formal “freedom ride.”

In April 1947, sixteen volunteers—eight blacks and eight whites—rode through the Upper South states of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky testing compliance with *Morgan*. To most Americans, then and now, these pioneer freedom riders were obscure figures, men and women who lived and labored outside the spotlight of celebrity and notoriety. During the immediate postwar era, the radical wing of the civil rights struggle was small, predominantly white, and fragmented among several organizations. Concentrated in New York, Chicago, and other large Northern cities, the radicals included followers of Mohandas Gandhi, Christian socialists, labor and peace activists, Quaker pacifists, Communists, and a varied assortment of left-wing intellectuals. Though ideologically diverse, they shared a commitment to militant agitation aimed at bringing about fundamental and even revolutionary change. Like India’s Gandhi, they dreamed of a world liberated from the scourges of racial prejudice, class oppression, and colonialism. Open to a variety of provocative tactics—economic boycotts, picketing, protest marches, sit-ins, and other forms of direct action—they operated on the radical fringe of American politics. With perhaps a few thousand adherents, the radical approach constituted something less than a mass movement. But the social and political turmoil of the Great Depression and the Second World War had produced a vanguard of activists passionately committed to widening the scope and accelerating the pace of the struggle for civil and human rights.

In 1946, the most active members of this radical vanguard were affiliated with two interrelated organizations, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and its parent organization, the Fel-

lowship of Reconciliation (FOR). It was within these groups that the idea of the Journey of Reconciliation, and later the Freedom Rides, was born. Founded in Chicago in 1942, CORE drew inspiration from the wartime stirrings of decolonization in Africa and Asia, and from the recent success of nonviolent mass resistance in Gandhi's India. But it also drew upon a somewhat older tradition of nonviolent protest nurtured by FOR.²¹

21. While there is no comprehensive study of radical civil rights activism during the 1930s and 1940s, there are a number of monographs that discuss the activities of individual activists and specific organizations. See especially August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942–1968* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 3–40; Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 3–149; Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000); John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); John A. Salmond, *A Southern Rebel: The Life and Times of Aubrey Williams, 1890–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Frank T. Adams, *James A. Dombrowski: An American Heretic, 1897–1983* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Robert F. Martin, *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, 1904–1977* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991); Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929–1959* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981); John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932–1962* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988); Thomas A. Kreuger, *And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, 1938–1948* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967); H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979); Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); Patricia Sullivan, ed., *Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Sullivan, *Days of Hope*; and Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day*. See also Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1233–1250; and Richard M. Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *Journal of American History* 55 (June 1968): 90–106. On the evolution of nonviolence and the American peace movement, see Joseph Kip Kosek, "Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1318–1348; Larence S. Wittner, *Rebels Against War: The American Peace Movement, 1941–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Scott H. Bennett, *Radical Pacifism: The War Resisters League and Gandhian Non-violence in America, 1915–1963* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Charles

Founded in 1914, at an international gathering of Christian pacifists in London, FOR maintained a steady course of dissent through war and peace. During the 1920s and 1930s, the American branch of FOR included some of the nation's leading social justice advocates, including radical economist Scott Nearing, socialist leader Norman Thomas, American Civil Liberties Union founder Roger Baldwin, and eminent theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Howard Thurman. Representing the interests of such a diverse group was never easy, but with the approach of the Second World War the organization found it increasingly difficult to satisfy both "radical" pacifists, who insisted on an absolutist commitment to nonviolence, and "pragmatic" pacifists, who acknowledged the necessity of waging war against totalitarian oppression. In 1940, the selection of an absolutist, A. J. Muste, as executive director drove most of the pragmatists out of the FOR, leaving the American branch with a small but dedicated core of radical activists. Muste was a former Dutch Reformed and Congregationalist minister who passed through Trotskyism and militant trade unionism before embracing radical pacifism and Gandhianism. Determined to make the FOR more than a left-wing debating society, he urged his followers to dedicate their lives to the cause of nonviolence. Countering the evils of militarism and social injustice required moral discipline, personal courage, and a willingness to suffer for one's beliefs, and nothing less than a total commitment to pacifist activism would do. Convinced that American society needed a radical overhaul, especially in the area of race relations, he wel-

Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971); Staughton Lynd, ed., *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966); and Jo Ann O. Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A. J. Muste* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981). On Gandhi, see Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951); Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and Stanley Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). On Gandhian and nonviolent philosophy, see Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: Norton, 1969); Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1934); Mulford Q. Sibley, ed., *The Quiet Battle: Writings on the Theory and Practice of Non-violent Resistance* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1963); and William Robert Miller, *Nonviolence: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966);

comed the creation of CORE as a natural extension of FOR's reform program.

Muste's prescriptive model was not for everyone, even in faithful pacifist circles. Nevertheless, his impassioned calls for engagement and sacrifice attracted a number of remarkable individuals. During the early 1940s, the FOR national office in New York became the nerve-center of American Gandhianism. Crammed into a small building on upper Broadway, near Columbia University, the FOR staff of twelve shared ideas, plans, and soaring dreams of social justice. Young, well-educated, and impoverished—most made less than twenty dollars per week—they lived and worked in the subterranean fringe of American life.²²

Among the FOR/CORE stalwarts were three men destined to play pivotal roles in the Freedom Rider saga: Bayard Rustin, James Peck, and James Farmer. A founding member of CORE and the co-secretary of FOR's Race and Industrial Department, Rustin—along with co-secretary George Houser—organized and led the Journey of Reconciliation of 1947, and would later serve as an advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He played no direct role in the Freedom Rides of 1961, spending most of the early 1960s in Europe and Africa. Yet, perhaps more than anyone else, Rustin was the intellectual godfather of the Freedom Rider movement. Peck, a radical journalist who acted as CORE's chief publicist, was the only person to participate in both the Journey of Reconciliation and the 1961 Freedom Rides. Severely beaten by Klansmen in Alabama in May 1961, he later wrote a revealing memoir of his experiences as a Freedom Rider. Farmer, like Rustin, was one of the founders of CORE. Although personal circumstances prevented him from participating in the Journey of Reconciliation, he was the guiding spirit behind CORE's 1961 Freedom Rides. As national director of CORE from 1961 to 1966, he presided over the organization's resurgence, crafting and sustaining the legacy of the Freedom Rides. Together, these three activists provided a critical link between the nonviolent civil rights initia-

22. Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 3–118; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 4–34; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 61–77, 81–110; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 35–54; James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 70–161; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 20–29. See also Nat Hentoff, *Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice*; and Wittner, *Rebels Against War*, 1–181.

tives of the 1940s and the full-blown movement of the 1960s. While none of these men achieved national fame in the manner of King or Rosa Parks, each in his own way exerted a powerful influence on the development of nonviolence in the United States. Their personal stories reveal a great deal about the origins and context of the Freedom Rides and about the hidden history of the civil rights struggle—especially the complex connections between North and South, blacks and whites, liberalism and radicalism, and religious and secular motivation.²³

Rustin, the oldest of the three, was born in 1912, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The child of Florence Rustin, an unwed black teenager, and Archie Hopkins, an itinerant black laborer who barely acknowledged his son's existence, he was adopted by Florence's parents, Julia and Janifer Rustin, and raised by an extended family of grandparents, aunts, and uncles who collectively eked out a living by cooking and catering for the local Quaker gentry. Julia Rustin was a member of the local Quaker meeting before joining her husband's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church following their marriage in 1891. And she remained a Quaker "at heart," naming her grandson for Bayard Taylor, a celebrated mid-nineteenth century Quaker leader. A woman of substance and deep moral conviction, Julia was the most important influence in Bayard's upbringing and the primary source of the pacifist doctrines that would anchor his lifelong commitment to nonviolence. Indulged as the favorite child of the Rustin clan, he gained a reputation as a brilliant student and gifted singer and musician, first as one of a handful of black students at West Chester High School, where he also excelled as a track and football star, and later at all-black Wilberforce University in Ohio, where he studied history and literature and toured as the lead soloist of the Wilberforce Quartet. Despite these accomplishments, he eventually ran afoul of the Wilberforce administration by challenging the school's compulsory ROTC pro-

23. Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 114–124, 183–196, 224–235; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 133–140, 225–301, 319–325; Bayard Rustin, *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), ix–61; Raymond Arsenault, "Bayard Rustin and the 'Miracle in Montgomery,'" in James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *A History of the African American People* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 156–157; James Peck, *Freedom Ride* (New York: Grove Press, 1962); Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 2–32, 101–116, 165–166, 195–291; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 4–19, 131–417.

gram and by engaging in homosexual activity (he reportedly fell in love with the son of the university president). Expelled in December 1933, he returned to Pennsylvania and enrolled at Cheyney State Teachers College the following fall.

At Cheyney, where he remained for three years, Rustin gained a reputation as a multi-talented student leader, distinguishing himself as a singer, a keen student of philosophy, and a committed peace activist. When Cheyney's president, Leslie Pinckney Hill, a devout black Quaker, invited the American Friends Service Committee to hold an international peace institute on the campus in the spring of 1937, Rustin was a willing and eager participant. Inspired by the dedicated pacifists who attended the institute and already primed for social action by his family and religious background, he soon accepted a position as a "peace volunteer" with the American Friends Service Committee's Emergency Peace Campaign. During a training session, he received further inspiration from Muriel Lester, a noted British pacifist and Gandhi protégé. After listening to Lester's eloquent plea for pacifism and nonviolent struggle, he threw himself into the peace campaign with an uncommon zeal that would later become his trademark. Along with three other volunteers—including Carl Rachlin, who would later serve as a CORE and Freedom Rider attorney—he spent the summer of 1937 in the upstate New York town of Auburn, where he honed his skills as a lecturer and organizer.

At the end of the summer, he returned to West Chester and Cheyney, but not for long. In the early fall, propelled by a growing disenchantment with southeastern Pennsylvania's political and cultural scene, and by a second scandalous (and interracial) homosexual incident, he moved northward to the alluring uncertainties of metropolitan Harlem, the unofficial capital of black America. Cast adrift from the relatively secure world of college life and facing the vagaries of the Great Depression, Rustin embarked on a remarkable odyssey of survival and discovery that took him through a labyrinth of radical politics and bohemian culture. Along the way, he became a professional singer, a dedicated Communist, and an uncloseted homosexual. During the late Thirties, he sang backup for Josh White and Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, worked as a recruiter for the Young Communist League, preached revolution and brotherhood on countless street

corners, and even squeezed in a few classes at City College, all the while gaining a reputation as one of Harlem's most colorful characters.

In early 1941, the Young Communist League asked Rustin to organize a campaign against segregation in the American armed forces, but later in the year, following the unexpected German attack on the Soviet Union, League leaders ordered him to cancel the campaign in the interests of Allied military solidarity. With this apparent shift away from racial and social justice agitation, Rustin became deeply disillusioned with the Communist Party. "You can all go to hell," he told his New York comrades, "I see that the Communist movement is only interested in what happens in Russia. You don't give a damn about Negroes." In June 1941, he left the Communist fold for good and transferred his allegiance to A. Philip Randolph, the legendary black socialist and labor leader who was busy planning a mass march on Washington to protest the Roosevelt Administration's refusal to guarantee equal employment opportunities for black and white defense workers. Randolph appointed Rustin the youth organizer for the march, but the two men soon had a serious falling out. After Roosevelt responded to Randolph's threatened march with an executive order creating a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), Randolph agreed to call off the march. But many of his young supporters, including Rustin, thought the protest march should continue as planned. Later in the war Rustin and Randolph resumed their friendship and collaboration, but the temporary break prompted the young activist to look elsewhere for a political and spiritual home. Consequently, in the fall of 1941, he accepted a staff position with A. J. Muste's Fellowship of Reconciliation.

As FOR youth secretary, Rustin returned to the pacifist track that he had followed as an American Friends Service Committee volunteer, immersing himself in the writings and teachings of Gandhi and pledging his loyalty to nonviolence, not just as a strategy for change, but as a way of life. Muste encouraged and nurtured Rustin's determination to apply Gandhian precepts to the African-American struggle for racial equality, and in the spring of 1942 the two men joined forces with other FOR activists to found the Committee (later "Congress") of Racial Equality. "Certainly the Negro possesses qualities essential for nonviolent

direct action.” Rustin wrote prophetically in October 1942. “He has long since learned to endure suffering. He can admit his own share of guilt and has to be pushed hard to become bitter. . . . He is creative and has learned to adjust himself to conditions easily. But above all he possesses a rich religious heritage and today finds the church the center of his life.”²⁴

As a CORE stalwart, Rustin participated in a number of non-violent protests, including an impromptu refusal to move to the back of a bus during a trip from Louisville to Nashville in the early summer of 1942. This particular episode earned him a roadside beating at the hands of the Nashville police, who later hauled him off to jail. A month after the incident Rustin offered the readers of the FOR journal *Fellowship* a somewhat whimsical description of his arrest:

I was put into the back seat of the police car, between two policemen. Two others sat in front. During the thirteen-mile ride to town they called me every conceivable name and said anything they could think of to incite me to violence. . . . When we reached Nashville, a number of policemen were lined up on both sides of the hallway down which I had to pass on my way to the captain’s office. They tossed me from one to another like a volleyball. By the time I reached the office, the lining of my best coat was torn, and I was considerably rumped. I straightened myself as best I could and went in. They had my bag, and went through it and my papers, finding much of interest, especially in the *Christian Century* and *Fellowship*. Finally the captain said, “Come

24. Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 6–95, 23 (first quotation); D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 7–56; Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 7–29; Bayard Rustin interviews, 1984–87, Columbia University Oral History Collection, New York, New York [hereinafter CUOHC]; Charles Moritz, ed., *Current Biography Yearbook 1967* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1967), 360; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 168–171; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 23–24; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 111; Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph*, 249–274, 275 (second quotation), 280–281, 378–380; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 51–90; Milton Viorst, *Fire in the Streets* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1981), 200–208; Kosek, “Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence,” 1336–1343; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 28–29; Bayard Rustin, “The Negro and Non-Violence,” *Fellowship* 8 (October 1942), 166–167 (third quotation); Rustin, *Down the Line*, ix–xv, 11. On Carl Rachlin, see Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 41–44, 157, 271; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 143, 151, 168, 173, 180, 226, 271, 277, 283, 412; and *New York Times*, January 4, 2000 (obituary).

here, nigger." I walked directly to him, "What can I do for you?" I asked. "Nigger," he said menacingly, "you're supposed to be scared when you come in here!" "I am fortified by the truth, justice, and Christ," I said. "There's no need for me to fear." He was flabbergasted and, for a time, completely at a loss for words. Finally he said to another officer, "I believe the nigger's crazy!"

In the end, the timely intervention of a sympathetic white bystander who had witnessed the roadside beating and the restraint of a cool-headed assistant district attorney (Ben West, a future Nashville mayor who would draw widespread praise for his moderate response to the student sit-ins of 1960 and 1961) kept Rustin out of jail, reinforcing his suspicion that even the white South could be redeemed through nonviolent struggle.²⁵

Soon after his narrow escape from Nashville justice, Rustin became a friend and devoted follower of Krishnaia Shridharani, a leading Gandhian scholar and the author of *War Without Violence*. This discipleship deepened his commitment to nonviolent resistance and non-cooperation with evil, and in 1943 he rejected the traditional Quaker compromise of alternative service in an army hospital. Convicted of draft evasion, he spent the next twenty-eight months in Federal prison. For nearly two years, he was imprisoned at the Federal penitentiary in Ashland, Ohio, where he waged spirited if futile campaigns against everything from the censorship of reading materials to racial segregation. In August 1945, a final effort to desegregate the prison dining hall led to solitary confinement, but soon thereafter he and several other pacifist malcontents were transferred to a Federal facility in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

Following his release from Lewisburg in June 1946, Rustin returned to New York to accept an appointment as co-secretary (with George Houser) of FOR's Race and Industrial Department, a position that he promptly turned into a roving mission for Gandhian nonviolence. Though physically weak and emaciated, he

25. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 6–7; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 46–47; Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 32–33; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 30–31. On Mayor Ben West, see David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 111–114, 127, 179, 198, 200, 210–213, 230–234, 719; and "Ain't Scared of Your Jails," Episode 3 of the documentary film series *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (Boston: Blackside, Inc., 1986).

took to the road, preaching the gospel of nonviolent direct action to anyone who would listen. As his biographer Jervis Anderson has noted, during the critical postwar year of 1946 Rustin “functioned as a one-man civil disobedience movement in his travels across the United States. He occupied ‘white only’ railroad compartments; sat in at ‘white only’ hotels; and refused to budge unless he was forcibly ejected.” All of this reinforced his dual reputation as a fearless activist and a Gandhian sage. He was both irrepressible and imaginative; and no one who knew him well was surprised when he, along with Houser, came up with the provocative idea of an interracial bus ride through the South. After the Journey of Reconciliation proposal was hatched, Rustin acted as a relentless advocate, eventually winning over, or at least wearing down, those who thought the plan was too dangerous. Without his involvement, the Journey—and perhaps even the Freedom Rides of 1961—would never have taken place.²⁶

Jim Peck followed a somewhat different path to the Journey of Reconciliation. Three years younger than Rustin, he grew up in one of Manhattan’s most prosperous households. The son of Samuel Peck, a wealthy clothing wholesaler (who died when his son was eleven years old), he spent the early years of the Great Depression at Choate, an elite prep school in Wallingford, Connecticut. Despite his family’s conversion from Judaism to Episcopalianism, Peck was a social outsider at Choate, which used a strict quota system to limit the number of religious and ethnic minorities on campus. The primary factor separating him from his fellow students was not religion or ethnicity, however. Politically precocious, he cultivated a reputation as an independent thinker who espoused idealistic political doctrines and who preferred the company of bookish intellectuals. In the fall of 1933, he enrolled at Harvard, where he honed his skills as a writer while assuming the role of a campus radical. At Harvard, he missed few opportunities to challenge the social and political conventions of the Ivy

26. Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 96–110, 111 (quotation); D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 50–134; Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 27–28, 34–51; Moritz, ed., *Current Biography Yearbook 1967*, 360–361; Rustin, *Down the Line*, ix–x, 5–52; Rustin interviews, CUOHC; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 171–172; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 24; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 111–117; Viorst, *Fire in the Streets*, 208–210; Pfeffer, A. *Philip Randolph*, 62, 142, 150–168; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 12–20, 34–50, 57, 64.

League elite and shocked his classmates by showing up at the freshman dance with a black date. As he recalled, this particular act of defiance was directed not only at “the soberly dressed Boston matrons on the sidelines” who “stared at us, whispered, and then stared again,” but also at his own mother who “referred to Negroes as ‘coons’” and “frequently remarked that she would never hire one as a servant because ‘they are dirty and they steal.’” By the end of his freshman year, he was a pariah, and his alienation from his family and the American establishment was complete. Dropping out of school, he emigrated to Paris where he lived as an avant-garde expatriate for two years. His years in Europe, where he witnessed the ascendance of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, deepened his commitment to activism and social justice. In the late Thirties a severe case of wanderlust and a desire to identify with the working class led to a series of jobs as a merchant seaman, an experience that eventually propelled him into the turbulent world of radical unionism. His years at sea also reinforced his commitment to civil rights. “Living and working aboard ships with interracial crews,” he later wrote, “strengthened my beliefs in equality.”

Returning to the United States in 1938, Peck helped to organize the National Maritime Union, which made good use of his skills as a writer and publicist. During these years, he also became a friend and follower of Roger Baldwin, the strong-willed founder of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Baldwin encouraged him to become involved in a number of social justice organizations, including the War Resisters League, and helped him find work with a trade union news syndicate. By the end of the decade, Peck was an avowed pacifist who spent much of his time publicizing the activities of the War Resisters League. Like Rustin, he refused to submit to the draft and was imprisoned for his defiance in 1942. He spent almost three years in the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut, where he helped to organize a work strike that led to the desegregation of the prison mess hall. After his release in 1945, he rededicated himself to pacifism and militant trade unionism, offering his services to a number of progressive organizations. For a time he devoted most of his energies to the War Resisters League and to editing the Workers Defense League *News Bulletin*. But in late 1946 he became increasingly absorbed with the race issue, especially after discovering and join-

ing CORE. Recent events had convinced him that the struggle for racial equality was an essential precondition for the transformation of American society, and the direct action philosophy of CORE provided him with a means of acting upon his convictions. With the zeal of a new recruit, he embraced the idea of the Journey of Reconciliation, which would be his first venture as a CORE volunteer.²⁷

Jim Farmer shared Peck's passion for direct action and non-violent protest. But in most other respects, from style and temperament to racial and regional background, the two men represented a study in contrasts. Born in Marshall, Texas, in 1920, Farmer was a black Southerner who had first-hand experience with the institutions of the Jim Crow South. Raised in a middle-class family, he was fortunate enough to avoid the degrading economic insecurities of the rural poor. But as the aspiring son of educated parents, he was forced to endure the painful psychological and social indignities of a racial caste system that warped and restricted his prospects. His mother, Pearl Houston Farmer, was a graduate of Florida's Bethune Cookman Institute and a former teacher; and his father, James Leonard Farmer, Sr., was a learned Methodist minister who had earned a Ph.D in theology at Boston University. One of the few blacks in early-twentieth century Texas to hold a doctoral degree, Farmer's father spoke seven languages and held academic positions at a number of black colleges, including Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, and Samuel Houston College in Austin, Texas. A towering figure in black academic circles, he was nonetheless cautious and deferential in his dealings with whites. This inconsistency troubled his

27. *New York Times*, July 13, 1993 (obituary); James Peck, *Underdogs vs. Upperdogs* (Canterbury, N.J.: n. p., 1969); James Peck, *We Who Would Not Kill* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1958); Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 15, 38–39 (quotations); Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 35; James Peck, interview by James Mosby, Jr., February 19, 1970, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. [hereinafter RBOHC]; Marvin Rich, interview by author, January 24, 2003; Gordon Carey, interview by author, November 24, 2002; Nancy L. Roberts, *American Peace Writers, Editors, and Periodicals: A Dictionary* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1991), 221–222; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 37. On Baldwin and the ACLU, see Samuel Walker, *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Diane Garey, *Defending Everybody: A History of the American Civil Liberties Union* (New York: TV Books, 1998); and Peggy Lamson, *Roger Baldwin: Founder of the American Civil Liberties Union* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976). On the activities of the War Resisters League, see Bennett, *Radical Pacifism*.

young son, who idealized his father's moral and intellectual stature but who eventually recoiled from what he came to see as a cringing hypocrisy that perpetuated racial injustice.²⁸

A brilliant student, young Jim Farmer entered school at the age of four and graduated from Wiley College at eighteen. At Wiley, he came under the influence of Melvin Tolson, an English professor and debating coach who nurtured his young protégé's oratorical skills. Farmer possessed a deep, mellifluous voice that was perfectly suited to a dramatic style of oratory; and by the time Tolson got through with him, his studied intonations carried the barest hint of an East Texas twang. This remarkable speaking voice became Farmer's trademark and the cornerstone of a grand manner that struck some observers as pretentious and condescending. Even as a teenager, he was a large and imposing figure with an ego to match. Ambitious and articulate, he felt constrained by the small-town, segregated culture of Marshall. His first taste of the outside world came in 1937 when he represented Wiley at a National Conference of Methodist Youth, at Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio. Although there were only a handful of black delegates in attendance, Farmer emerged as one of the stars of the conference, persuading his fellow Methodists to approve a resolution urging Congress to pass anti-lynching legislation. "Everyone here wants to stop lynching," he informed the assembled delegates, "The only question is how long do we have to wait? How long, oh, Lord, how long? The purpose of this motion is not to damn the South and the many decent people who live there. . . . The purpose of this motion is to *stop lynching now*." The audience responded with a standing ovation and approval by acclamation, providing him with the "first taste of the heady wine of public acclaim." The conference later elected him to its governance committee, a remarkable achievement for a seventeen-year-old black boy from east Texas.²⁹

28. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 33–65; James Farmer, interview by Ed Edwin, 1979, CUOHC.

29. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 117–128, 129 (quotation); Farmer interview, CUOHC. In a 1970 interview, Jim Peck stated: "I feel that Mr. Farmer's only asset was that he was an effective public speaker Therefore we needed somebody like Marvin Rich to really do the brain work, strategy, and basic work required in running a national organization." Peck interview, RBOHC. Following Farmer's death in 1999, an Associated Press wire service story emphasized the strange power of his voice: "Diabetes stilled the legs that had walked treacherous miles on the roads of the hostile South during the Freedom Rides of

The exhilarating triumph in Ohio reinforced Farmer's determination to become involved in the widening struggle for racial justice, and a few weeks later he accepted an invitation to attend a joint meeting of the National Negro Congress and the Southern Negro Youth Conference. Held in Richmond, Virginia, the meeting attracted some of the nation's most prominent black leaders, including A. Philip Randolph, Howard University President Mordecai Johnson, and Howard political scientist Ralph Bunche. Traveling the thousand miles to Richmond by car, Farmer and two companions, one of whom was a white delegate from the University of Texas, encountered the inevitable frustrations of finding food, shelter, and restroom facilities along the Jim Crow highways of the Deep South. By the time the young travelers arrived at the conference, they had seen and experienced enough to fuel a growing sense of outrage. But the conference itself was even more eye-opening. Here Farmer received his first exposure to the passionate militance of left-wing politics. He also got more than a glimpse of the sectarian intrigue and political infighting between Communists and socialists that threatened to tear the National Negro Congress apart. Founded in 1936 as a national clearinghouse for civil rights and labor organizations concerned about fair employment issues, the National Negro Congress had elected Randolph as its first chairman. But during the organization's first two years, the black socialist leader had grown increasingly suspicious of Communist activists who were reportedly exploiting the National Negro Congress for selfish political purposes. Randolph's anger boiled over at the Richmond conference, where his explosive resignation speech both shocked and thrilled Farmer.³⁰

the 1960s. But, oh, that voice! Right up to his final days, nothing had muted the mighty, flowing baritone that helped mold and inspire the civil rights movement for one generation, then brought it back to life for college students of a later time." *St. Petersburg Times*, July 11, 1999. See also Farmer's interview in "Ain't Scared of Your Jails."

30. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 129-133; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 150; John B. Kirby, "Race, Class, and Politics: Ralph Bunche and Black Protest," in Benjamin Rivlin ed., *Ralph Bunche: The Man and His Times* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990), 36-39; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 32-43; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 58; *Official Proceedings of the Second National Negro Congress* (Philadelphia: October 15-17, 1937). See also Lawrence Wittner, "The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment," *American Quarterly* 22 (Fall 1970): 883-901.

To his conservative father's dismay, Farmer was never quite the same after the Richmond conference. The dream of becoming a theologian and following in his father's footsteps was still alive, and in the fall of 1938 he dutifully entered the Howard University School of Theology, where his father had recently accepted a position as a professor of Greek and New Testament studies. But during his years at Howard the young divinity student continued to gravitate toward radical politics. Inspired by Howard Thurman, a charismatic professor of social ethics and dean of the chapel whom he later described as a "mystic, poet, philosopher, preacher," Farmer became intrigued with Gandhianism, pacifism, and radical versions of the social gospel. Under Thurman's direction, he wrote his thesis on "A Critical Analysis of the Interrelationships Between Religion and Racism." Thurman also helped him secure a position as a part-time secretary in the Washington office of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and by the time he graduated in 1941 he was completely captivated by FOR's philosophy of nonviolent interracial activism. Refusing ordination as a Methodist minister—a decision clinched by the news that his choice of pastorates was limited to all-black congregations—he accepted a full-time position as FOR's race relations secretary. Assigned to FOR's regional office in Chicago, he arrived in the Windy City in August 1941, ready, as he put it, to lead "an assault on the demons of violence and bigotry."³¹

For the next two years, he spearheaded a series of direct action campaigns in Chicago and also traveled throughout the Midwest spreading the FOR gospel of pacifism and nonviolent resistance to social injustice. Though barely old enough to vote, he exuded an aura of confidence and command that belied his youth. Some found him arrogant and a bit overbearing, but no one doubted his intelligence or his passionate belief in the struggle for

31. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 135 (first quotation), 71 (second quotation), 133–146; James Farmer, interview by John Britton, September 28, 1968, RBOHC; Farmer interview, CUOHC; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 22–23. On Howard Thurman, see Walter E. Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds., *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1998); Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1989); Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1992); and Alton B. Pollard III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

racial justice. At the University of Chicago, he organized an interracial study group on Gandhianism and encouraged students and others to engage in sit-ins and picketing campaigns at segregated coffeehouses, restaurants, roller rinks, and theaters. Working closely with both Rustin and George Houser, FOR's white field secretary, he also created Fellowship House, "an interracial men's cooperative" designed to challenge a restrictive covenant that segregated the neighborhood surrounding the University. In the spring of 1942, these efforts led to the formation of the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality, which Farmer conceived as part of a national direct action network known as the "Brotherhood Mobilization." By 1943, the organization had evolved into the Committees of Racial Equality, and a year later the name was changed to Congress of Racial Equality. At first, A. J. Muste resisted Farmer's insistence that CORE should be allowed to have an identity largely independent of FOR, but the FOR chairman eventually relented. Adopted at the organization's first annual meeting, the CORE charter stated that "the purpose of the organization shall be to federate local interracial groups working to abolish the color line through direct non-violent action." With Muste's blessing, Farmer became CORE's first national chairman, though not for long.³²

Muste's acceptance of CORE's partial autonomy came at a price, one that eventually proved too costly for Farmer to bear. In June 1943, he received a "promotion" that required relocation to New York. "I knew at once what it all meant," he later wrote, "New York, where they could watch me closely, and full-time so I would have less time to freewheel for CORE. I was being given bigger wings, but they would be clipped wings." Muste was not unsympathetic to the aims and activities of CORE, but his primary loyalty was to pacifism and FOR. And he expected the same from Farmer, whose primary job, in his view, was to organize and recruit new members for FOR. As long as FOR was paying Farmer's salary, the interests of the parent organization, not CORE, had to come first. Moreover, Farmer was a notoriously

32. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 4–17, 18 (quotation); Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 67–116; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 93; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 50–54; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 22–27; George Houser, interview by Katherine Shannon, September 11, 1967, RBOHC; Farmer interview, RBOHC; Farmer interview, CUOHC.

inattentive administrator who preferred public speaking to the background work of building and maintaining an organization. Well aware of Muste's concerns, Farmer made a valiant effort to satisfy his obligations to FOR and to pay more attention to administrative matters. But by the spring of 1945 it was clear to both men that the dual arrangement was not working. In May, following an awkward meeting in Muste's office, Farmer resigned from his FOR staff position—and from his cherished unpaid position as CORE's national chairman.

Following Farmer's departure, CORE reorganized its leadership structure, creating an executive directorship filled by Houser. But the troubled relationship between FOR and CORE continued to plague both organizations in the postwar years. While the split between Muste and Farmer was largely personal and organizational in nature, the nonviolent movement also harbored persistent philosophical and ideological divisions, including disagreements over the connection between pacifism and social justice and the competing claims of morality and pragmatism as the primary rationale for nonviolent direct action.³³

Farmer himself would later participate in these ongoing debates, especially during and after the Freedom Rides of 1961. But in the immediate postwar era he found himself somewhat removed from the world of FOR and CORE. In late 1945, he accepted a position with the Upholsterers International Union of North America (UIU), which sent him to Virginia, and later to High Point, North Carolina, to organize furniture workers. Throughout his stay in the Piedmont he maintained contact with Houser, who kept him abreast of CORE affairs, including the Journey of Reconciliation. And as soon as Farmer heard about the idea of the Journey, which he considered "exciting and intriguing," he was sorely tempted to abandon the frustrations of union organizing and join the ride. But, with a new wife to support, he could not afford to leave a steady-paying job. Turning down a

33. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 116 (quotation), 115–116, 149–161; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 19–25, 42–44; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 111–117; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 62–63; Houser interview, RBOHC; Farmer interview, CUOHC; Rich interview; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 93–95. On the difficulties and controversies surrounding the merger of pacifism, nonviolence, and civil rights activism during the 1940s and 1950s, see Kosek, "Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence," 1318–1320, 1336–1348; and Tracy, *Direct Action*, 26–75.

chance to take part in the Journey of Reconciliation was a difficult decision that isolated him from the cause that still excited his deepest passions; and when the UIU transferred him to Cincinnati, he felt even farther removed from the action. Later, after learning that Rustin and several other old friends had been arrested in North Carolina, he “felt pangs of guilt for not having been there.” This failure to take part in the Journey would bother him for many years, and only in 1961—when he returned to CORE as national director and the leader of the Freedom Rides—would he begin to feel that he had atoned for his absence from CORE’s first great adventure below the Mason-Dixon line.³⁴

The plan for an interracial bus ride through the segregated South grew out of a series of discussions between Bayard Rustin and George Houser held during the summer of 1946. Like Rustin, Houser was a Northerner with little first-hand experience in the South. Born in Cleveland, he traveled to the Philippines with his white Methodist missionary parents and later lived in New York, California, China, and Colorado before entering Union Theological Seminary in 1939. At Union, he became a committed pacifist and refused to register for the draft. Convicted of draft evasion, he served a year in federal prison. Following his release in the fall of 1941, Muste hired him to run FOR’s Chicago office. During the early days of CORE, he collaborated with Farmer but developed an even closer relationship with Rustin, whom he came to admire greatly. Later, as the newly appointed co-secretaries of FOR’s Race and Industrial Department and as members of CORE’s executive committee, the two young friends were eager to boost CORE’s profile by demonstrating the utility of nonviolent direct action.³⁵

34. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 165–166; Farmer interview, CUOHC; Rich and Carey interviews.

35. Houser interview, RBOHC; George M. Houser, “A Personal Retrospective on the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation,” typescript of a paper given at Bluffton College, September 1992, box 1, Congress of Racial Equality Collection, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania [hereinafter CORE-C]; George M. Houser, “Thy Brother’s Blood: Reminiscences of World War II,” *Christian Century* 112 (August 16, 1995): 774; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 5–6, 16–21, 29, 34; D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 50–55, 62, 64, 67,

For them the timing of the *Morgan* decision and the ensuing controversy over compliance and enforcement could not have been better. During its first four years, CORE had operated as “a loose federation of local groups which were united mostly by their aim of tackling discrimination by a particular method—nonviolent direct action.” “This put emphasis almost completely on local issues and organization,” Houser recalled many years later. “Thus it was difficult to get a sense of a national movement or to develop a national strategy. One of the results of this reality was that it was almost impossible for CORE to raise funds to establish itself as a separate entity.” In addition to enhancing CORE’s national stature and autonomy, a project like the Journey of Reconciliation also promised to provide “an entering wedge for CORE into the South.” As Houser explained, “We had no local groups in the South and it wasn’t easy to organize them at this point, especially with the two words ‘racial equality’ in our name. Those were fighting words in the South. But with a definite project around which to rally, we felt there was a possibility of opening up an area seemingly out of reach.” Rustin and Houser were confident that the issue of Jim Crow transit—which, in Houser’s words, “touched virtually every black person, was demeaning in its effect and a source of frequent conflict”—represented a perfect target for CORE’s first national project. Even if the project failed to desegregate interstate buses, “challenging discrimination in transportation, by striking a raw nerve, would get public attention.”³⁶

During the summer of 1946, as expectations of compliance with the *Morgan* ruling faded, the idea of a CORE-sponsored freedom ride became a frequent topic of conversation among CORE stalwarts in New York. Some predicted that the proposed ride would reveal a liberalizing trend in the postwar South, but others were less hopeful. Indeed, judging by the experiences of individual travelers who had challenged Jim Crow in recent months, the prospects for a smooth ride seemed dim. The most troubling incident was the brutal beating of Isaac Woodard in mid-February. Brought to national attention by NAACP executive secretary Walter White in July, the Woodard case involved a recently discharged black veteran returning to his North Carolina

76, 119, 125–126, 128, 131–134; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 20–21, 26, 28, 32, 36, 53–55.

36. Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 3–4 (quotations); Tracy, *Direct Action*, 54.

home from a Georgia military base. Traveling on an interstate Greyhound, Woodard was arrested in Batesburg, South Carolina after he and the bus driver “exchanged words over some minor point of racial etiquette.” Dragged from the bus and beaten by Batesburg police chief Linwood Shull and a deputy, the 27-year-old soldier suffered massive injuries, including the blinding of both eyes. Having survived fifteen months fighting the Japanese in the Pacific, he had run afoul of two white men who saw fit to gouge out his eyes with the blunt end of a billy club. Such treatment was egregious enough to prompt an FBI investigation and a Federal indictment of Shull in the fall of 1946. But, even with the sworn testimony of army doctors, it was not enough to secure a conviction from an all-white Columbia, South Carolina jury.

A second and equally revealing case involved Wilson Head, a courageous black World War II veteran who undertook his own personal freedom ride from Atlanta to Washington in July 1946. Traveling on the Greyhound line and insisting on his right to sit in the front of the bus, he braved angry drivers, enraged passengers, and menacing police officers—one of whom threatened to shoot him during a brief detention in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Somehow Head managed to make it to Washington without injury or arrest, suggesting that testing compliance with the *Morgan* decision was possible if not altogether safe. To the dismay of many white Southerners, individual acts of defiance on segregated buses and trains were becoming increasingly common in the postwar years, especially in the upper South and even among local and intrastate passengers. The black historian John Hope Franklin, for example, successfully defied a Richmond bus driver who ordered him to the back of a local bus in 1947. Having just given a blood transfusion for his older brother Buck, who lay dying in a veterans’ hospital, Franklin was distracted by shock and grief as he took a seat in the “white” section of the bus. In no mood to submit to white authority, he told the driver that he planned to remain in the front no matter what. With several black passengers in the back urging Franklin to stand his ground, the driver ultimately backed down. But the young historian was fortunate he did not end up in a Richmond jail cell.

Widely publicized in the black press, the Woodard and Head episodes provided concrete examples of what CORE activists were likely to face if they ventured into the South as freedom riders.

But these and other cautionary tales had no apparent impact on the resolute organizers of the proposed project. By the time CORE's executive committee met in Cleveland in mid-September, Rustin and Houser had developed a full-scale plan for the ride. After a lengthy discussion of the risks and dangers of a Southern foray, the committee endorsed the idea and authorized Rustin and Houser to seek approval and funding from FOR. With a little coaxing, the FOR staff soon embraced the plan, although Muste insisted that the ride should be a joint project of FOR and CORE.³⁷

Over the next few months, FOR's Racial and Industrial Committee worked out the details, adding an educational component and ultimately limiting the scope of the ride to the upper South. The revised plan called for "a racially mixed deputation of lecturers" who would speak at various points along the route, giving "some purpose to the trip outside of simple tests and experimentation with techniques." The riders would not only test compliance with the *Morgan* decision; they would also spread the gospel of nonviolence to at least part of the South. The original plan involved a region-wide journey from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans, Louisiana. But, after several of CORE's Southern contacts warned that an interracial journey through the Deep South would provoke "wholesale violence," Rustin and Houser reluctantly agreed to restrict the ride to what was perceived as the more moderate Upper South. "The deep South may be touched later," they explained, "depending on what comes out of this first experience." After much debate, they also agreed that all of the riders would be men, acknowledging "that mixing the races and sexes would possibly exacerbate an already volatile situation."

37. On the Isaac Woodard episode, see Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day*, 362–363 (quotation); Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow*, 62; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 219; *The Crisis* 53 (September 1946): 276; and *Race Relations: A Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations* 4 (August–September 1946): 6–7. The NAACP brought a civil suit against Atlantic Greyhound in an attempt to recover damages for Woodard, but in November 1947 a Charleston, West Virginia jury issued a verdict in favor of the bus company. On Wilson Head's freedom ride, see John A. Salmond, *My Mind Set on Freedom: A History of the Civil Rights Movement 1954–1968* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 3–4, 87, 149; John Hope Franklin, interview by author, February 9, 2005. The Richmond incident took place in July 1947, in the aftermath of the Journey of Reconciliation. Houser interview, RBOHC; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 2–6; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 114–116; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 20, 34; Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 14–15; Rustin, *Down the Line*, 13; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 133–134; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 113–114.

This decision was a grave disappointment to several women—including the veteran black activists Ella Baker and Pauli Murray—who had been actively involved in planning the trip. Many of the planning meetings took place in the New York apartment of Natalie Mormon, who, like Baker and Murray, had considerable experience traveling through the South. But their plaintive protests against paternalism fell on deaf ears. Less controversially, Rustin and Houser also came up with an official name for the project—the Journey of Reconciliation. This redemptive phrase pleased Muste and lent an air of moral authority to the project.³⁸

For reasons of safety and to insure that the compliance tests would be valid, CORE leaders did not seek any advance publicity for the Journey. But within the confines of the movement, they quietly spread the word that CORE was about to invade the South. The proposed ride received enthusiastic endorsements from a number of black leaders—most notably Howard Thurman, A. Philip Randolph, and Mary McLeod Bethune—and from several organizations, including the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, an interracial group of liberal Southern clergymen. The one organization that expressly refused to endorse the ride was, predictably, the NAACP. When CORE leaders first broached the subject with national NAACP officials in early October, Thurgood Marshall and his colleagues were preoccupied with a recent District of Columbia Court of Appeals decision that extended the applicability of *Morgan* to interstate railways. In *Matthews v.*

38. Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 5–6 (quotations); George M. Houser and Bayard Rustin, "Memorandum Number 2: Bus and Train Travel in the South," box 20, FORP; Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 16; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 34; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 133–134; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 54–55; Grant, *Ella Baker*, 91–92; Marian B. Mollin, "The Limits of Egalitarianism: Radical Pacifism, Civil Rights, and the Journey of Reconciliation," *Radical History Review* 88 (Winter 2004): 113–138. See also Marian B. Mollin, "Actions Louder than Words: Gender and Political Activism in the American Radical Pacifist Movement, 1942–1972," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Massachusetts, 2000). Baker had already conducted her own "freedom rides" on several occasions. In December 1942, she and a second black passenger refused to relinquish their seats on a crowded Georgia bus; although they avoided arrest and violence, both were subjected to threats and verbal abuse. Six months later, on May 4, 1943, Baker successfully challenged Jim Crow dining car restrictions on a train from Mobile, Alabama, to Jacksonville, Florida. However, while traveling from Jacksonville to New York City on May 29, a second challenge was foiled by two military policemen who drove her from the dining car, bruising one of her legs in the process. With Thurgood Marshall's help, she later filed a formal complaint against the railway company. See Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 124–127.

Southern Railway, the court ruled that there was “no valid distinction between segregation in buses and railway cars.” For a time, this ruling gave NAACP attorneys renewed hope that the *Morgan* decision would actually have an effect on interstate travel. But in the aftermath of the ruling, only one railway—the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad—actually desegregated its interstate trains. The vast majority of Southern railways continued to segregate all passengers, interstate or not. Several railroad officials insisted that the ruling only applied to the District of Columbia, but to protect their companies from possible federal interference they also adopted the same “company rules” strategy used by some interstate bus lines. The basis for segregation, they now claimed, was not state law but company policy. Racial separation in railroad coaches was thus a private matter allegedly beyond the bounds of public policy or Constitutional intrusion. Because the *Chiles* decision, rendered by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1910, sanctioned such company rules, NAACP attorneys were seemingly stymied by this new strategy.³⁹

In mid-November, Marshall and the NAACP legal brain trust held a two-day strategy meeting in New York to address the challenge of privatized segregation. No firm solution emerged from the meeting, but the attorneys did reach a consensus that CORE’s proposal for an interracial ride through the South was a very bad idea. The last thing the NAACP needed at this point, or so its leaders believed, was a provocative diversion led by a bunch of impractical agitators. A week later Marshall went public with the NAACP’s opposition to direct action. Speaking in New Orleans on the topic “The Next Twenty Years Toward Freedom for the Negro in America,” he criticized “well-meaning radical groups in New

39. Robert L. Carter to Daniel E. Byrd, June 12, 1946, George Houser to Marian Perry, October 9, 1946, W. A. C. Hughes to Thurgood Marshall, July 8, 1946, Robert L. Carter, Memos to Walter White, July 26, September 26, 1946, all in box II-B190, NAACP; Baltimore *Afro-American*, June 26, July 6, 27, November 2, 1946; *Los Angeles Tribune*, September 21, 1946; *Kansas City Plaindealer*, September 20, 1946; *Chicago Defender*, August 17, November 30, 1946; *Oklahoma City Black Dispatch*, December 9, 1946; *Memphis World*, November 15, 1946; *Atlanta Daily World*, November 27, 1946; Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 6–8; Barnes, *Journey From Jim Crow*, 52–53, 62–63; Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 74–76; Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 17; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 34–35; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 114–115. On the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, see Robert F. Martin, “Critique of Southern Society and Vision of a New Order: The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, 1934–1957,” *Church History* 52 (March 1983): 66–80; and Martin, *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, 1904–1977*.

York” who were planning to use Gandhian tactics to breach the wall of racial segregation. Predicting a needless catastrophe, he insisted that a “disobedience movement on the part of Negroes and their white allies, if employed in the South, would result in wholesale slaughter with no good achieved.” He did not mention FOR or CORE by name, nor did he divulge any details about the impending Journey of Reconciliation. But Marshall’s words, reprinted in the *New York Times*, sent a clear warning to Muste, Rustin, and Houser. Since the Journey would inevitably lead to multiple arrests, everyone involved knew that at some point CORE would require the assistance and cooperation of NAACP-affiliated attorneys. So Marshall’s words could not be taken lightly. The leaders of FOR and CORE were in no position to challenge the supremacy of the NAACP. But after some hesitation, they realized that Marshall’s pointed critique could not go unanswered.⁴⁰

The response, written by Rustin and published in the *Louisiana Weekly* in early January 1947, was a sharp rebuke to Marshall and a rallying cry for the nonviolent movement:

I am sure that Marshall is either ill-informed on the principles and techniques of non-violence or ignorant of the processes of social change.

Unjust social laws and patterns do not change because supreme courts deliver just opinions. One need merely observe the continued practices of jim crow in interstate travel six months after the Supreme Court’s decision to see the necessity of resistance. Social progress comes from struggle; all freedom demands a price.

At times freedom will demand that its followers go into situations where even death is to be faced. . . . [D]irect action means picketing, striking and boycotting as well as disobedience against unjust conditions, and all of these methods

40. Thurgood Marshall to Dear Sir [members of NAACP Legal Committee], November 6, 1946, box II-B190, NAACPP; *New York Times*, November 23, 1946 (quotation); Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 114–115; Carter interview. According to Rustin and Houser, Roy Wilkins, the Assistant Secretary who worked under Executive Secretary Walter White, was the only national NAACP leader to respond favorably to the proposed Journey of Reconciliation. D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 134.

have already been used with some success by Negroes and sympathetic whites. . . .

I cannot believe that Thurgood Marshall thinks that such a program would lead to wholesale slaughter. . . . But if anyone at this date in history believes that the “white problem,” which is one of privilege, can be settled without some violence, he is mistaken and fails to realize the ends to which man can be driven to hold on to what they consider privileges.

This is why Negroes and whites who participate in direct action must pledge themselves to non-violence in word and deed. For in this way alone can the inevitable violence be reduced to a minimum. The simple truth is this: unless we find non-violent methods which can be used by the rank-and-file who more and more tend to resist, they will more and more resort to violence. And court-room argumentation will not suffice for the activization which the Negro masses are today demanding.⁴¹

Rustin’s provocative and prophetic manifesto did not soften Marshall’s opposition to direct action. But it did help to convince Marshall, and NAACP executive secretary Walter White, that CORE was determined to follow through with the Journey of Reconciliation, with or without their cooperation. CORE leaders had already announced that the two-week Journey would begin on April 9, and there was no turning back for activists like Rustin and Houser who believed that the time for resolute action had arrived. For them, all the signs—including Harry Truman’s unexpected decision, in December 1946, to create a President’s Commission on Civil Rights—suggested that the movement for racial justice had reached a crossroads. It was time to turn ideas into action, to demonstrate the power of nonviolence as Gandhi and others were already doing in India.⁴²

41. Bayard Rustin, “Our Guest Column: Beyond the Courts,” *Louisiana Weekly*, January 4, 1947; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 115–116.

42. On Truman and the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, see John Hope Franklin, “A Half-Century of Presidential Race Initiatives: Some Reflections,” *Journal of Supreme Court History* 24 (1999): 227–230; William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970); and Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973). See also President’s Com-

With this in mind, Rustin and Houser left New York in mid-January on a scouting expedition through the upper South. During two weeks of reconnaissance in Virginia and North Carolina, they followed the proposed route of the coming Journey, scrupulously obeying the laws and customs of Jim Crow transit so as to avoid arrest. At each stop they met with local civil rights and black community leaders who helped to arrange housing, lecture and rally facilities, as well as possible legal representation for the riders to come. Some dismissed the interracial duo as an odd and misguided pair of outside agitators, but most did what they could to help. In several communities, Rustin and Houser encountered the “other” NAACP: the restless branch leaders and youth council volunteers (and even some black attorneys such as future CORE leader Floyd McKissick) who were eager to take the struggle beyond the courtroom. After Rustin returned to New York in late January, Houser traveled alone to Tennessee and Kentucky, where he continued to be impressed with the untapped potential of the black South. In the end the four-state scouting trip produced a briefcase full of commitments from church leaders and state and local NAACP officials, a harvest which pushed Marshall and his colleagues toward a grudging acceptance of the coming Journey’s legitimacy. Soon Roy Wilkins, Spot Robinson, Charles Houston, and even Marshall himself were offering “helpful suggestions” and promising to provide CORE with legal backup if and when the riders were arrested. Most national NAACP leaders still considered the Journey to be a foolhardy venture. But, as the start of the Journey drew near, there was a noticeable closing of the ranks, a feeling of movement solidarity that provided the riders with a reassuring measure of legal and institutional protection. As Houser put it, with the promise of Southern support and with the NAACP more or less on board, “we felt our group of participants would not be isolated victims as they challenged the local and state laws.”⁴³

mittee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington: GPO, 1947); and Steven Lawson, ed., *To Secure These Rights: The Report of Harry S. Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights* (New York: Bedford, 2003).

43. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 17; D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 134–135; Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 6–7 (quotation); Carter interview. Rustin and Houser traveled together to Washington, D.C.; Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia; and Chapel Hill, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Asheville, North Carolina. Houser traveled alone to Nashville and

Even so, the Journey remained a dangerous prospect, and finding sixteen qualified and dependable volunteers who had the time and money to spend two weeks on the road was not easy. The organizers' determination to enlist riders who had already demonstrated a commitment to nonviolent direct action narrowed the field and forced CORE to draw upon its own staff and other seasoned veterans of FOR and CORE campaigns. When it proved impossible to find a full complement of volunteers who could commit themselves to the entire Journey, Rustin and Houser reluctantly allowed the riders to come and go as personal circumstances dictated. In the end, less than half of the riders completed the entire trip.⁴⁴

The sixteen volunteers who traveled to Washington in early April to undergo two days of training and orientation represented a broad range of nonviolent activists. There were eight whites and eight blacks and an interesting mix of secular and religious backgrounds. In addition to Houser, the white volunteers included Jim Peck; Homer Jack, a Unitarian minister and founding member of CORE who headed the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination; Worth Randle, a biologist and CORE stalwart from Cincinnati; Igal Roodenko, a peace activist from upstate New York; Joseph Felmet, a conscientious objector from Asheville, North Carolina, representing the Southern Workers Defense League; and two FOR-affiliated Methodist ministers from North Carolina, Ernest Bromley and Louis Adams. The black volunteers included Rustin; Dennis Banks, a jazz musician from Chicago; Conrad Lynn, a civil rights attorney from New York City; Eugene Stanley, an agronomy instructor at North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro, North Carolina; William Worthy, a radical journalist affiliated with the New York Council for a Permanent FEPC; and three CORE activists from Cincinnati—law

Knoxville, Tennessee, and Louisville, Kentucky. Rustin and Houser, "Memorandum #2: Bus and Train Travel in the South"; Houser interview, RBOHC. During the scouting trip, Rustin and Houser met Floyd McKissick, a young black attorney practicing in Durham, North Carolina. The first black graduate of the University of North Carolina Law School, McKissick would later serve as CORE's national chairman (1963–1966) and national director (1966–1968). On McKissick, see Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 293–294, 381, 396, 402–424.

44. Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 7–8; Rustin and Houser, "Memorandum #2: Bus and Train Travel in the South."

student Andrew Johnson, pacifist lecturer Wallace Nelson, and social worker Nathan Wright.⁴⁵

Most of the volunteers were young men still in their twenties; several were barely out of their teens. Rustin, at age 35, was the oldest. Nearly all, despite their youth, had some experience with direct action, and seven had been conscientious objectors during World War II. But with the exception of Rustin's impromptu freedom ride in 1942, none of this experience had been gained in the Jim Crow South. No member of the group had ever been involved in a direct action campaign quite like the Journey of Reconciliation, and only the North Carolinians had spent more than a few weeks in the South.

Faced with so many unknowns and the challenge of taking an untried corps of volunteers into the heart of darkness, Rustin and Houser fashioned an intensive orientation program. Meeting at FOR's Washington Fellowship House, nine of the riders participated in a series of seminars that "taught not only the principles but the practices of nonviolence in specific situations that would arise aboard the buses." Using techniques pioneered by FOR peace activists and CORE chapters, the seminars addressed expected problems by staging dramatic role-playing sessions. "What if the bus driver insulted you? What if you were actually assaulted? What if the police threatened you?" These and many other questions were resolved through socio-dramas in which participants would act the roles of bus drivers, hysterical segregationists, police—and 'you.' Whether the roles had been acted correctly and whether you had done the right thing was then discussed. Socio-dramas of other bus situations followed. In all of them, you were supposed to "remain nonviolent, but stand firm," Jim Peck recalled. Two days of this regimen left the riders exhausted but better prepared for the challenges to come.⁴⁶

Leaving little to chance, Rustin and Houser also provided each rider with a detailed list of instructions. Later reprinted in a pamphlet entitled *You Don't Have To Ride Jim Crow*, the instruc-

45. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 13–14; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 7–8; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 35; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 116; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 135; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 55.

46. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 15–16 (quotations); Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 8; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 116; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 35–36; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 55.

tions made it clear that the task at hand was not, strictly speaking, civil disobedience but rather establishing “the fact that the word of the U.S. Supreme Court is law”:

WHEN TRAVELING BY BUS WITH A TICKET FROM
A POINT IN ONE STATE TO A POINT IN ANOTHER
STATE:

1. If you are a Negro, sit in a front seat.
If you are a white, sit in a rear seat.
2. If the driver asks you to move, tell him *calmly and courteously*: “As an interstate passenger I have a right to sit anywhere in this bus. This is the law as laid down by the United States Supreme Court.”
3. If the driver summons the police and repeats his order in their presence, tell him exactly what you told the driver when he first asked you to move.
4. If the police ask you to “come along” without putting you under arrest, tell them you will not go until you are put under arrest. Police have often used the tactic of frightening a person into getting off the bus without making an arrest, keeping him until the bus has left and then just leaving him standing by the empty roadside. In such a case this person has no redress.
5. If the police put you under arrest, go with them peacefully. At the police station, phone the nearest headquarters of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People, or one of their lawyers. They will assist you.
6. If you have money with you, you can get out on bail immediately. It will probably be either \$25 or \$50. If you don’t have bail, anti-discrimination organizations will help raise it for you.

7. *If you happen to be arrested, the delay in your journey will only be a few hours. The value of your action in breaking down Jim Crow will be too great to be measured.*⁴⁷

Additional instructions assigned specific functions to individuals or subgroups of riders, distinguishing between designated testers and observers. “Just which individual sat where on each lap of our trip,” Peck recalled, “would be planned at meetings of the group on the eve of departure. A few were to act as observers. They necessarily had to sit in a segregated manner. So did whoever was designated to handle bail in the event of arrests. The roles shifted on each lap of the Journey. It was important that all sixteen not be arrested simultaneously and the trip thus halted.”

Throughout the training sessions, Rustin and Houser kept reiterating that Jim Crow could not be vanquished by courage alone; careful organization, tight discipline, and strict adherence to non-violence were also essential. An unorganized and undisciplined assault on segregation, they warned, would play into the hands of the segregationists, discrediting the philosophy of nonviolence and postponing the long-awaited desegregation of the South.⁴⁸

When the riders gathered at the Greyhound and Trailways stations in downtown Washington on the morning of April 9 for the beginning of the Journey, the predominant mood was anxious but upbeat. As the riders boarded the buses, they were accompanied by Ollie Stewart of the *Baltimore Afro-American* and Lem Graves of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, two black journalists who had agreed to cover the first week of the Journey. Joking with the reporters, Rustin, as always, set a jovial tone that helped to relieve the worst tensions of the moment. But there was also a general air of confidence that belied the dangers ahead. Sitting on the bus prior to departure, Peck thought to himself that “it would not be too long until Greyhound and Trailways would ‘give up segrega-

47. Bayard Rustin and George Houser, *You Don't Have To Ride Jim Crow* (Washington: Interracial Workshop, 1947). Copies of this pamphlet can be found in reel 25, Congress of Racial Equality Papers (Microfilm) [hereinafter COREP]; and in the “George Houser Scrapbook—Journey of Reconciliation 1947,” box 2, CORE-C.

48. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 16.

tion practices' in the South." Years later, following the struggles surrounding the Freedom Rides of 1961, he would look back on this early and unwarranted optimism with a rueful eye. But during the first stage of the Journey, his hopeful expectations seemed justified.⁴⁹

The ride from Washington to Richmond was uneventful for both groups of riders, and no one challenged their legal right to sit anywhere they pleased. For a few minutes, Rustin even sat in the seat directly behind the Greyhound driver. Most gratifying was the decision by several regular passengers to sit outside the section designated for their race. Everyone, including the drivers, seemed to take desegregated transit in stride, confirming a CORE report that claimed the Jim Crow line had broken down in northern Virginia in recent months. "Today any trouble is unlikely until you get south of Richmond," the report concluded, "So many persons have insisted upon their rights and fought their cases successfully, that today courts in the northern Virginia area are not handing down guilty verdicts in which Jim Crow state laws are violated by interstate passengers."

At the end of the first day of the Journey, the CORE riders celebrated their initial success at a mass meeting held at the Leigh Avenue Baptist Church, and prior to their departure for Petersburg the following morning Wally Nelson delivered a moving speech on nonviolence during a chapel service at all-black Virginia Union College. At the church the enthusiasm for desegregation among local blacks was palpable, suggesting that at least some Southern blacks were more militant than the riders had been led to believe. But the mood was decidedly different among the predominantly middle-class students at Virginia Union, who exhibited an attitude of detachment and denial. During a question and answer session, it became clear that many of the students were "unwilling to admit that they had suffered discrimination in transportation." As Conrad Lynn, who joined the Journey

49. Ibid., 18 (quotation); "Log-Journey of Reconciliation," April 9-23, 1947, typescript, Bayard Rustin Files, box 51, FORP. Wally Nelson maintained the log. Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 9; *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 19, 1947. When interviewed by historian John D'Emilio a half-century later, Bromley recalled: "Nobody knew what was going to happen. Everybody on this thing went into it with apprehension because they knew what could occur and what had occurred . . . I wouldn't say we were terror-stricken, but everybody was frightened." D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 135.

in Richmond, observed, the students simply “pretended that racial oppression did not exist for them.”⁵⁰

The prospects for white compliance and black militance were less promising on the second leg of the Journey. But even in southern Virginia, where most judges and law enforcement officials had yet to acknowledge the *Morgan* decision, the riders encountered little resistance. During the short stint from Richmond to Petersburg, there were no incidents other than a warning from a black passenger who remarked that black protesters like Nelson and Lynn might get away with sitting in the front of the bus in Virginia but farther South things would get tougher. “Some bus drivers are crazy,” he insisted, “and the farther South you go, the crazier they get.” As if to prove the point, a segregationist Greyhound driver had a run-in with Rustin the following morning. Ten miles south of Petersburg, the driver ordered the black activist, who was seated next to Peck, to the back of the bus. After Rustin politely but firmly refused to move, the driver vowed to take care of the situation once the bus reached North Carolina. At Oxford, the driver called the local police, but after several minutes of interrogation the officer in charge declined to make an arrest. During the wait most of the black passengers seemed sympathetic to Rustin’s actions, but a black schoolteacher boarding the bus at Oxford scolded him for needlessly causing a forty-five minute delay. “Please move. Don’t do this,” he pleaded, “You’ll reach your destination either in front or in back. What difference does it make?” This would not be the last time that the CORE riders would hear this kind of accommodationist rhetoric.⁵¹

While Rustin was dealing with the Greyhound driver’s outrage, a more serious incident occurred on the Trailways bus. Before the bus left the Petersburg station, the driver informed Lynn that he could not remain in the front section reserved for whites. Lynn did his best to explain the implications of *Morgan*, but the driver—unaccustomed to dealing with black lawyers—“countered

50. “Log-Journey of Reconciliation,” 1–2; Rustin and Houser, *You Don’t Have To Ride Jim Crow*, 1 (quotation); Rustin, *Down the Line*, 14; Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 9–10; Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 18; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 117; D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 136; Conrad Lynn, *There Is a Fountain* (Westport, Ct.: Lawrence Hill, 1979), 109 (quotation).

51. “Log-Journey of Reconciliation,” 2; Rustin and Houser, *You Don’t Have To Ride Jim Crow*, 1; Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 10 (quotation); Rustin, *Down the Line*, 14–15, 16 (quotation).

that he was in the employ of the bus company, not the Supreme Court, and that he followed company rules about segregation.” The unflappable New Yorker’s refusal to move led to his arrest on a charge of disorderly conduct, but only after the local magistrate talked with the bus company’s attorney in Richmond. During a two-hour delay, several of the CORE riders conducted a spirited but largely futile campaign to drum up support among the regular passengers. A white Navy man in uniform grumbled that Lynn’s behavior merited a response from the Ku Klux Klan, and an incredulous black porter (who reminded Houser of a fawning “Uncle Tom” character in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*) challenged Lynn’s sanity. “What’s the matter with him? He’s crazy. Where does he think he is?” the porter demanded, adding “We know how to deal with him. We ought to drag him off.”

As a menacing crowd gathered around the bus, Lynn feared that he might be beaten up or even killed, especially after the porter screamed: “Let’s take the nigger off! We don’t want him down here!” But, in the end, he managed to escape the vigilantism of both races. Released on a \$25 bail bond, he soon rejoined his comrades in Raleigh, where a large crowd of black students from St. Augustine’s College gathered to hear Nelson and Roodenko hold forth on the promise of nonviolent struggle. Thanks to Lynn’s composure, a relieved Nelson told the crowd, the Journey had experienced its first arrest without disrupting the spirit of nonviolence.⁵²

New challenges awaited the riders in Durham, where three members of the Trailways group—Rustin, Peck, and Johnson—were arrested on the morning of April 12. While Rustin and Johnson were being hauled off for ignoring the station superintendent’s order to move to the black section of the bus, Peck informed the police: “If you arrest them, you’ll have to arrest me, too, for I’m going to sit in the rear.” The arresting officers promptly obliged him and carted all three men off to jail. When Joe Felmet and local NAACP attorney C. Jerry Gates showed up at the jail a half hour later to secure their release, the charges were dropped.

52. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 15 (first and second quotations); “Log-Journey of Reconciliation,” 2–4; Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 10–11; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 117; D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 136–137; Lynn, *There Is a Fountain*, 109–110, 111 (third quotation).

But a conversation with the Trailways superintendent revealed that there was more trouble ahead. "We know all about this," the superintendent declared. "Greyhound is letting them ride. But we are not."

Even more disturbing was the effort by a number of local black leaders to pressure Gates and the Durham NAACP to shun the riders as unwelcome outside agitators. A rally in support of the Journey drew an unexpectedly large crowd, and the local branch of the NAACP refused to abandon the riders. But the rift within Durham's black community reminded the riders that white segregationists were not the only obstruction to the movement for racial equality.⁵³

The next stop was Chapel Hill, the home of the University of North Carolina. Here, for the first time, the CORE riders would depend on the hospitality of white Southerners. Their host was the Reverend Charles M. Jones, the courageous pastor of a Presbyterian congregation that included University president Frank Porter Graham—a member of President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights—and several other outspoken liberals. A native Tennessean, Jones was a member of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, a former member of FOR's national council, and a leading figure among Chapel Hill's white civil rights advocates. Despite the efforts of Jones, Fellowship of Southern Churchmen activist Nelle Morton, and others, life in this small college town remained segregated; but there were signs that the local color line was beginning to fade. Earlier in the year, the black singer Dorothy Maynor had performed before a racially integrated audience on campus, and Jones's church had hosted an interracial union meeting sponsored by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). These and other breaches of segregationist orthodoxy signaled a rising tolerance in the University community, but they also stoked the fires of reaction among local defenders of Jim Crow. By the time the CORE riders arrived, the town's most militant segregationists were primed and ready for a confrontation that would serve warning that Chapel Hill, despite the influence

53. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 16–17 (quotations); "Log-Journey of Reconciliation," 5–6; Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 18–20; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 11–12.

of the University and its liberal president, was still white man's country.⁵⁴

The riders' first few hours in Chapel Hill seemed to confirm the town's reputation as an outpost of racial moderation. Jones and several church elders welcomed them at the station, and a Saturday night meeting with students and faculty at the University went off without a hitch.

On Sunday morning most of the riders, including several blacks, attended services at Jones's church and later met with a delegation representing the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. At this point, there was no hint of trouble and the interracial nature of the gatherings, as Houser later recalled, seemed natural "in the liberal setting of this college town." As the riders boarded a Trailways bus for the next leg of the journey, they could only hope that things would continue to go as smoothly in Greensboro, where a Sunday night mass meeting was scheduled. Since there was no Greyhound run from Chapel Hill to Greensboro, the riders divided into two groups and purchased two blocs of tickets on Trailways buses scheduled to leave three hours apart.⁵⁵

Five of the riders—Johnson, Felmet, Peck, Rustin, and Roodenko—boarded the first bus just after lunch. But they never made it out of the station. As soon as Felmet and Johnson sat down in adjoining seats near the front of the bus, the driver, Ned Leonard, ordered Johnson to the "colored" section in the rear. The two riders explained that they "were traveling together to meet speaking engagements in Greensboro and other points south" and

54. "Log-Journey of Reconciliation," 6–7; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 12–14; Houser interview, RBOHC; Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 20–21; Chapel Hill *Daily Tar Heel*, April 16–19, 1947; W. McKee Evans, interview by author, February 18, 2005; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 118; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 137–138; Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day*, 422–423, 556–559. The "George Houser Scrapbook—Journey of Reconciliation 1947," box 2, CORE-C, contains numerous clippings on the Chapel Hill incident. See especially *Greensboro Daily News*, April 15, 17–18, 1947; *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1947; and *Carolina Times*, April 26, 1947. On Frank Porter Graham, see Warren Ashby, *Frank Porter Graham: A Southern Liberal* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 1980). On Nelle Morton and the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen's role in the Journey of Reconciliation's visit to Chapel Hill, see John Salmond, " 'Flag-bearers for Integration and Justice': Local Civil Rights Groups in the South, 1940–1954," in Glenn Feldman, ed., *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 227–235.

55. Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 12 (quotation); Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 20–21; *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1947.

“that they were inter-state passengers . . . ‘covered’ by the Irene Morgan decision.” Unmoved, Leonard walked to the nearby police station to arrange for their arrest. While he was gone, Rustin and Roodenko engaged several of the passengers in conversation, creating an “open forum” which revealed that many of the passengers supported Felmet and Johnson’s protest. When Leonard later passed out waiver cards that the bus company used to absolve itself from liability, one woman balked, declaring “You don’t want me to sign one of those. I am a damn Yankee, and I think this is an outrage.” Shaking her hand, Roodenko exclaimed: “Well, there are two damn Yankees on the bus!” By this time, Felmet and Johnson had been carted off to the police station, and Peck had followed them to the station to arrange bail. But Leonard soon discovered that he had two more protesters to deal with. Encouraged by the sympathetic reaction among the regular passengers, Rustin and Roodenko moved to the seat vacated by the arrested riders, which prompted a second round of arrests. Having already paid fifty dollars each for Felmet and Johnson’s release, Peck called Houser, who was still at Jones’s parsonage, to bring down another hundred dollars to get Rustin and Roodenko out of jail.⁵⁶

While the four men waited for Houser and Jones to arrive with the bail money, Peck shuttled back and forth from the police station to the bus, checking on his colleagues’ bags and trying to keep tabs on the situation at the bus station. By this point, the bus had been delayed almost two hours, and it was obvious to everyone at the scene that a group of “outside agitators” had provoked an incident. One bystander, a white cab driver, vowed, “They’ll never get a bus out of here tonight,” and a few minutes later Peck found himself surrounded by five angry cab drivers as he crossed the street. Snarling “Coming down here to stir up the niggers,” one of the drivers punched Peck in the side of the head. When Peck refused to retaliate and simply asked, “What’s the matter?”, the man gave him “a perplexed look and started to walk away awkwardly.” Moments later, two men—an unidentified local white minister and Eugene Stanley, the black rider who taught at

56. “Log-Journey of Reconciliation,” 6 (quotations) – 7; Houser interview, RBOHC; Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 21–22; Rustin, *Down the Line*, 17; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 118; D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 138; *New York Times*, April 14, 1947; *Chapel Hill Daily Tar Heel*, April 15–16, 1947.

North Carolina A&T—urged the driver to leave Peck alone, but were told to mind their own business. Thinking that both men were part of the CORE group, the cab drivers rushed toward them menacingly. But after learning that both were North Carolinians, they let them go. Returning to the police station, Peck warned Jones and Houser, who had finally arrived with the bail money, that trouble was brewing.⁵⁷

After surveying the situation, Jones concluded that the riders would have to travel to Greensboro by car. Once bond had been posted for the arrested riders, the group piled into Jones's car and headed to the parsonage for a brief stop before leaving town. Unfortunately, two cabs filled with irate whites sped after them. As Peck recalled the harrowing scene, "we succeeded in getting to Reverend Jones's home before them. When we got inside and looked out the window, we saw two of the drivers getting out with big sticks. Others started to pick up rocks by the roadside. Then, two of the drivers, apparently scared, motioned to the others to stop. They drove away. But a few minutes later Reverend Jones, who since the CIO meeting in his church had been marked as a 'nigger lover,' received an anonymous phone call. 'Get the niggers out of town by midnight or we'll burn down your house,' threatened a quivering voice." Determined to get the riders out of Chapel Hill before nightfall, Jones rounded up three university students willing to drive the group to Greensboro and also called the police, who reluctantly agreed to provide an escort to the county line.⁵⁸

As soon as the riders left, Jones took his wife and two children to a friend's house for protection, a precaution that seemed warranted by subsequent events. When Jones returned home Sunday evening accompanied by a friend, Hilton Seals, he found a crowd of angry white protesters in his front yard. The two men tried to ignore the crowd's taunts, but as they walked to the door

57. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 17 (first quotation); Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 21 (second and third quotations); Houser interview, RBOHC; "Log-Journey of Reconciliation," 7; *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1947; Chapel Hill *Daily Tar Heel*, April 15–16, 1947; Evans interview; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 139.

58. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 22 (quotation) – 23; "Log-Journey of Reconciliation," 7; Rustin, *Down the Line*, 17; *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1947; Chapel Hill *Daily Tar Heel*, April 15–16, 1947; Evans interview; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 139; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 119, offers a detailed but largely inaccurate account of the pursuit.

Seals was struck with a rock. On Monday morning, Jones received a second anonymous call threatening him with death. Later in the day several cab drivers milling around the bus station attacked Martin Walker, a disabled white war veteran and university student, after he was seen "talking to a Negro woman." A second university student, Ray Sylvester, "was knocked unconscious by a cab driver for 'being too liberal.'" During the next few days, Jones received additional death threats by mail, and several anonymous calls threatened his church, prompting an emergency meeting of the congregation. When they learned of the threats, several university students volunteered to guard Jones's home and church. But this gesture proved unnecessary, thanks in part to President Frank Graham's forceful consultation with the local police. By the end of the week the wave of intimidation had subsided, even though the controversy surrounding the bus station incident continued to simmer.⁵⁹

Speaking to an overflow crowd at the University's Memorial Hall four days after the arrests, Jones defended the Journey of Reconciliation as the work of true Christians who had made "a thorough and exhaustive study of law as related to transportation in order that Christians and others might understand the law and practice it." But several students in the audience criticized the Journey's provocative tactics. "When you consider the general attitudes and practices in the South," one student insisted, "it is stupid to raise a point which can bring only friction, a crusade of going about and raising such questions cannot be merely trying to bring about reconciliation. It has as its end the creation of dissensions not here before. I cannot but damn all connected with bringing a group here merely to stir up dissension." Unmoved, Jones, along with a few others local dissenters, continued to speak out on behalf of CORE and the struggle for racial justice.

For most of the Chapel Hill community, the restoration of an uneasy truce between "university liberals" and the local segregationist majority represented an acceptable resolution of the crisis. But for some the unsettling influence of the CORE riders persisted. In late April, after Rustin returned to Chapel Hill to de-

59. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 23; *New York Times*, April 14, 1947; *Greensboro Daily News*, April 17, 1947 (first quotation); *Chicago Defender*, May 3, 1947 (second quotation); *Chapel Hill Daily Tar Heel*, April 15-18, 1947; Evans interview.

liver two lectures on nonviolence, one in the basement of a Methodist church and a second in a university lecture hall, one local liberal, William McGirt, wrote a letter to the *Daily Tarheel* praising Rustin as a “prophet” who had turned “a non-violent example of resistance” into “a dramatic symbol upon which racial minorities can seize to find their freedoms courageously but without debasing their spirits with anger.” “These Fellows of Reconciliation, many of whom have been in prison for their convictions,” McGirt added, “. . . are the genuine creators of a new age.”⁶⁰

In the wake of the Chapel Hill incident, the CORE riders were somewhat apprehensive about the remaining ten days of the Journey. But whatever doubts they may have had about the wisdom of continuing the trip disappeared during a rousing mass meeting in Greensboro on Sunday evening. At the Shiloh Baptist Church—the same church that would welcome the Freedom Riders fourteen years later—the congregation’s emotional embrace reminded them of why they had come south seeking justice. “The church was crowded to capacity and an atmosphere of excitement

60. *Greensboro Daily News*, April 18, 1947 (Jones quotations); *Chapel Hill Daily Tarheel*, April 17–May 1 (McGirt quotation), 1947; *Carolina Times*, April 26, 1947; Evans interview. Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 13–14, notes: “I always had a guilt feeling about this incident because we left Charles Jones to face the wrath of the taxi drivers and others of their ilk in Chapel Hill. He was already a marked man in the community because he was always on the cutting edge of racial and social issues (such as union organization) which divided the community.” Conservative editors and reporters in North Carolina often printed diatribes against Jones. See, for example, the editorial in the *Charlotte Textile Times*, April 15, 1947 (typescript copy in “George Houser Scrapbook—Journey of Reconciliation 1947”), which declared: “The town of Chapel Hill, N.C., has for several years been affiliated with a ‘crank,’ a Presbyterian preacher named Charles M. Jones, who was brought there from Tennessee. He is the type of minister who, like the Holy Rollers and the sect which handles live snakes, interprets the Bible to suit his own warped ideas and he seems to be hipped upon the subject of social equality with Negroes. When, during the war, a Negro band was sent to Chapel Hill to furnish music for Navy preflight trainees, Mr. Jones saw a great opportunity. He began to invite Negroes to his church for ice cream socials and encouraged white girls to attend and have dates with the Negro men. Encouraged by the success of that effort, Mr. Jones invited students and professors from a Negro college at Durham, N.C., to a breakfast at his church. Four students and a professor accepted and each was seated at breakfast beside a white girl. . . . There are always a few crack-pot students in a university or college, but it is unusual for them to have the encouragement and support which they receive at Chapel Hill.” In 1953, conservative critics of Jones’s civil rights activism prompted a Presbytery inquiry that led to his resignation from the Presbyterian ministry. See Ashby, *Frank Porter Graham*, 305–309; “Deplore Secrecy in the Jones Case,” *Christian Century* 170 (March 4, 1953): 245; “Presbyterian U.S. Commission Fires Chapel Hill Pastor,” *Christian Century* 170 (March 11, 1953): 277; Henry Ruark, “Orange Presbytery vs. Jones,” *Christian Century* 170 (March 18, 1953): 319–320; and “Pastor vs. Presbytery,” *Time* (February 23, 1953): 53.

prevailed,” Peck recalled in 1962. “Word had spread about what had happened to us and why we were late. . . . After the usual invocation, hymn-singing, scripture-reading, and prayer, Rustin, who is a particularly talented speaker, told our story. He interrupted it only to get one or another of us to rise and tell about a specific incident or experience. Then he continued. When he finished, the people in the crowded church came forward to shake hands and congratulate us. A number of women had tears in their eyes. A few shook my hand more than once.”⁶¹

The mass meeting in Greensboro was the emotional high point of the Journey, and for most of the riders the last ten days on the road represented little more than a long anticlimax. There were, however, a few tense moments—and a few surprises—as the riders wound their way through the mountains of western North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. No two bus drivers—and no two groups of passengers—were quite the same. On the Greensboro to Winston-Salem leg, a white passenger from South Carolina expressed his disgust that no one had removed Lynn from a front seat. “In my state,” he declared, “he would either move or be killed.”

The following day, during a Greyhound run from Winston-Salem to Statesville, Nelson occupied a front seat without incident. But after the riders transferred to a Trailways bus in Statesville, the driver ordered him to the rear. After Nelson explained that he was an interstate passenger protected by the *Morgan* decision, the driver relented. But this did not satisfy several white passengers, including a soldier who demanded to know why Nelson had not been moved or arrested. “If you want to do something about this,” the driver responded, “don’t blame this man [Nelson]; kill those bastards up in Washington.” Following several stops north of Asheville, the white section of the bus became so crowded that two white women had to stand in the aisle. When they asked why Nelson had not been forced to give up his seat, the driver cited the *Morgan* decision. Although the women later moved to the Jim Crow section in the back, the atmosphere on the bus remained tense. “It was a relief to reach Asheville,” Houser recalled many years later.⁶²

61. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 23 (quotations); D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 139.

62. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 18 (first and second quotations); “Log–Journey of Recon-

Asheville was the home town of Joe Felmet, the young Southern Workers Defense League activist who had been arrested in Chapel Hill, and several of the riders spent the night at his parents' house. This did not please at least one neighbor who shouted, "How're your nigger friends this morning?", as Felmet and the other riders left for the station. After the riders boarded a Trailways bus headed for Knoxville, Tennessee, a white woman complained to the driver that Dennis Banks, a black musician from Chicago who had just joined the Journey, was sitting in the whites-only section. When Banks, who was sitting next to Peck, politely refused to comply with the driver's order to move, the police were summoned. Twenty minutes of haggling over the law ensued before Banks was finally arrested. The police also arrested Peck, but only after he moved to the Jim Crow section insisting that he be treated the same as his black traveling companion.

Brought before Judge Sam Cathey, a blind and notoriously hard-edged Asheville politician, the two defendants created a sensation by hiring Curtiss Todd to represent them in court. Neither Cathey nor the local prosecutor had ever heard of *Morgan*, and they had to borrow Todd's copy of the decision during the trial. An NAACP-affiliated attorney from Winston-Salem, Todd was the first black lawyer ever to practice in an Asheville courtroom. Despite this breach of local racial etiquette, Judge Cathey—who reminded the defendants that "We pride ourselves on our race relations here"—made sure that other shibboleths of Jim Crow justice remained in force. "In the courtroom where we were tried," Peck later declared, "I saw the most fantastic extreme of segregation in my experience—Jim Crow bibles. Along the edges of one Bible had been printed in large letters the words 'white.' Along the page edges of the other Bible was the word 'colored.' When a white person swore in he simply raised his right hand while the clerk held the Bible. When a Negro swore in, he had to raise his right hand while holding the colored Bible in his left hand. The white clerk could not touch the colored Bible."⁶³

ciliation," 8; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 14, 15 (third quotation).

63. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 24–26 (quotations); Rustin, *Down the Line*, 18; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 16; *Asheville Citizen*, April 19, 1947; *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1947; *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 26, 1947; James Peck, "Not So Deep Are the Roots," *Crisis* (September 1947): 274. On Felmet, see the Joe Felmet Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; and the FBI files on

The Jim Crow ethos did not prevent the white and black defendants from receiving the same sentence—thirty days on the road gang, the maximum under North Carolina law. But, during a long night in the white section of the city jail, Peck discovered that many of his fellow inmates bore a special animus towards white agitators from the North. “Defending the niggers?” one oversized man bellowed, moving toward the rail-thin activist with his fists clenched. “They should have given you thirty years.” Bracing himself for a blow, Peck blurted out: “I was just traveling with my friend and I happen to believe that men are equal.” After an awkward silence, another inmate, playing the role of peace-maker, interjected: “Well, it’s too bad that all men can’t get along together, but they can’t.” With this puzzling statement the mood shifted, and the inmates decided to leave Peck alone. Banks had less trouble among the black inmates, some of whom regarded him as a hero. But both riders were relieved when Todd arrived with the required \$800 bail bond a few hours later.⁶⁴

While Peck and Banks were detained in Asheville, the rest of the riders went on to Knoxville, where they welcomed three new riders—Homer Jack, Nathan Wright, and Bill Worthy. A seasoned veteran of Chicago direct action campaigns, Jack could hardly wait to join the Journey. But he found the “taut morale” of his CORE colleagues a bit unnerving. “The whites were beginning to know the terror that many Negroes have to live with all the days of their lives,” he noted. “All members of the party were dead-tired, not only from the constant tenseness, but also from participating in many meetings and conferences at every stop.”⁶⁵

Jack himself soon experienced the emotional highs and lows of direct action in the South. After a full day of interracial meetings in Knoxville, he and Wright tested compliance on the night Greyhound run to Nashville. With Houser serving as the designated observer, they sat in adjoining seats four rows behind the driver. “Slowly heads began to turn around and within five minutes the driver asked Wright to go to the back of the bus,” Jack

Felmet in the Journey of Reconciliation folder, box 20, FORP.

64. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 26 (quotations); Rustin, *Down the Line*, 18; Curtiss Todd to Thurgood Marshall, April 19, 1947, Robert L. Carter to Curtiss Todd, April 23, 1947, box II-B184, NAACP.

65. Homer A. Jack, “Journey of Reconciliation,” *Common Ground* (Autumn 1947): 22, 23 (quotation); Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 14–15; Houser interview, RBOHC.

recalled. "Wright answered, 'I prefer to sit here.' I said I and Wright were friends, that we were riding together, that we could legally do so because of the *Morgan* decision. The bus driver then pleaded, 'Wouldn't you like to move?' We said we would like to stay where we were. The driver left the bus, apparently to talk to bus officials and police. After much ogling by passengers and bus employees . . . the driver finally reappeared and started the bus, without any more words to us." So far so good, Jack thought to himself, but as the bus left the outskirts of Knoxville he started to worry "that the hard part of the Journey was still ahead." Unaccustomed to the isolation of the rural South, he began to conjure up images of impending doom. "Ours was the first night test of the entire Journey," he later noted. "The southern night, to Northerners at least, is full of vigilante justice and the lynch rope from pine trees if not palms. We wondered whether . . . the bus company—or one of its more militant employees—would telephone ahead for a road block and vigilantes to greet us in one of the Tennessee mountain towns. Neither of us slept a moment that night. We just watched the road." When nothing of this sort actually happened, Jack felt more than a little foolish, concluding that the South, or at least Tennessee, was less benighted than he had been led to believe. "The reaction of the passengers on the trip was not one of evident anger," he observed, "and certainly not of violence. It was first surprise, then astonishment, and even tittering. On that bus, anyway, there was only apathy, certainly no eager leadership in preserving the ways of the Old South."

In Nashville, Jack and Wright—having arrived "early in the morning, exhausted, relieved, and with a bit of the exhilaration of the adventurer"—regaled several college classes with tales of nonviolent struggle. But at the end of the day, just before midnight, they resumed their journey of discovery, boarding a train for Louisville. This was "the first train test" attempted by the CORE riders, and no one knew quite what to expect. When a conductor spied Jack and Wright sitting in adjoining reserved seats in a whites-only coach, he collected their tickets without comment. But he soon returned, whispering to Jack: "He's your prisoner, isn't he?" After Jack responded "no," the incredulous conductor ordered Wright to "go back to the Jim Crow coach." Wright refused, citing *Morgan*, which prompted the conductor to mutter "that he never had had to face this situation before and that if we

[Jack and Wright] were riding back in Alabama he wouldn't have to face it: the passengers would throw us both out the window." Despite this bluster, the conductor did not follow through with his threat to have them arrested when the train stopped in Bowling Green, and Wright remained in the white coach all the way to Louisville.⁶⁶

A second team of riders traveled from Knoxville to Louisville by Greyhound, and they too escaped arrest. Worthy and Roodenko shared a seat in the front of the bus, and no one commented on the arrangement until they reached the small town of Corbin, a hundred miles north of Knoxville. When the young black journalist refused to move to the back, the driver called the police and "hinted that there would be violence from the crowd if Worthy did not move." However, the driver and the local police relented after one of the white passengers, a woman from Tennessee, defended Worthy's legal right to sit wherever he pleased. Once again there was hard evidence that at least some white Southerners were willing to accept desegregated transit.⁶⁷

Several of the riders, including Jack and Wright, left the Journey in Louisville on April 19. But approximately half of the riders participated in the final four days of testing, as three small groups of riders converged on Washington. Although most of these concluding bus and train trips were uneventful, there were two arrests in western Virginia, Nelson in Amherst and Banks in Culpepper. In both cases, the drivers and law enforcement officers involved displayed confusion about the law and some reluctance to follow through with actual arrests, suggesting that Virginia officials were still trying to sort out the implications of *Morgan*. And, despite the arrests, the behavior of several bystanders indicated that race relations in Virginia were changing. In Culpepper, one courageous black woman who sold bus tickets at a local concession stand, boarded the bus and offered to help Banks in any

66. Jack, "Journey of Reconciliation," 23–24 (quotations); Rustin, *Down the Line*, 19; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 15–16.

67. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 19; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 15–16. In 1961, Worthy told Interstate Commerce Commission investigators: "It has been my practice, started as far back as 1944, that whenever I am traveling in the Southern part of the United States, to deliberately go into the white waiting room." typescript, March 21, 1961, RD56, box 9, Investigate Report Case Files Relating to Complaints Against Motor Carriers in Interstate Commerce, 1961–70, Interstate Commerce Commission Records, Record Group 134, U. S. National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

way she could; and two local whites spoke out on Banks's behalf. "If I had been you I would have fought them before letting them take me off the bus," one of them told Banks, as the young musician calmly went off to jail.⁶⁸

For the riders, the return to Washington on April 23 brought a sense of relief—and a measure of pride in their perseverance. But, to their disappointment, there was no public event to mark the conclusion of a remarkable collective experience. "At the end of our Journey," Peck recalled in 1962, "there were no reporters flocking around us to ask whether it had been worth it or whether we would do it again—as they did after the Freedom Ride fourteen years later. If there had been, most of would have answered yes." The Journey's official balance sheet, as reported by CORE, listed 26 tests of compliance, 12 arrests, and only one act of violent resistance. But the project's accomplishments drew little attention from the mainstream press in the spring of 1947. Even among white reporters interested in racial matters, the Journey could not compete with the unfolding drama of Jackie Robinson's first few weeks in a Brooklyn Dodgers uniform.⁶⁹

In the black press, the Journey fared much better, of course, especially in the columns of the two black reporters who accompanied the riders during the first week of the trip. Ollie Stewart of the Baltimore *Afro-American*, who witnessed the confrontation in Chapel Hill and the mass meeting in Greensboro, hailed the Journey as a watershed event. "For my part, I am glad to have had even a small part in the project—even that of an observer," he wrote in late April. "History was definitely made. White and colored persons, when the whole thing was explained to them as

68. Jack, "Journey of Reconciliation," 24; Rustin, *Down the Line*, 19–21; Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 16–17; Houser interview, RBOHC; Peck, "Not So Deep Are the Roots," 273, 274 (quotation); Lynchburg *News*, April 23–24, 28, 1947; Lynchburg *Advance*, April 29, 1947. "Log–Journey of Reconciliation," 9–11, provides a detailed summary of Houser and Nelson's bus and train trip from Lynchburg, Virginia to Washington, D.C.

69. Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 27 (quotation); "Log–Journey of Reconciliation," 11; Rustin, *Down the Line*, 14. For a sampling of the press reaction to the Journey of Reconciliation, see "George Houser Scrapbook–Journey of Reconciliation 1947," box 2, CORE-C. On the public reaction to and press coverage of Jackie Robinson's first month as a Major League ballplayer, see Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 174–200.

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 more simple 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."⁷⁰ In the weeks and months following the Journey, several riders published reports on the their recent experiences in the South. Rustin and Houser—in CORE's official report, *We Challenged Jim Crow*—offered both a day-by-day narrative and general commentary on what the Journey had revealed. "The one word which most universally describes the attitude of police, of passengers, and of the Negro and white bus riders is 'confusion'," they concluded. "Persons taking part in the psychological struggle in the buses and trains either did not know of the *Morgan* decision or, if they did, possessed no clear understanding of it." And yet there were clear indications that the confusion could be alleviated. "Much was gained when someone in our group took the lead in discussion with bus drivers or train conductors and when police appeared," they reported, adding: "As the trip progressed it became evident that the police and the bus drivers were learning about Irene Morgan decision as word of the 'test cases' was passed from city to city and from driver to driver." To Rustin and Houser, the Journey demonstrated "the need for incidents as 'teaching techniques.'" "It is our belief that without direct action on the part of groups and individuals, the Jim Crow pattern in the South cannot be broken," they insisted, "We are equally certain that such action must be nonviolent." Homer Jack, writing in the Unitarian magazine *Common Ground*, offered a similar assessment. "What, finally, did the Journey of Reconciliation accomplish?" he asked rhetorically, answering: "It showed progressive Americans that the *Morgan* decision must be imple-

70. Baltimore *Afro-American*, April 26, 1947.

mented by constant ‘testing’—in the spirit of goodwill—and by subsequent law enforcement. The Journey helped implement the decision at least by spreading knowledge of it to bus drivers and some law-enforcement officers (both policemen and judges) in the upper South. The Journey also showed whites and Negroes living in that area that the *Morgan* decision could be enforced without disastrous results, if the proper psychological and legal techniques were used. The Journey gave these techniques—and accompanying inspiration—to thousands of whites and Negroes in the South.”⁷¹

As they wrote these and other reflections, Rustin, Houser, and Jack were well aware of the unfinished business in the courts. Six separate incidents during the Journey had produced twelve arrests, the legal and financial consequences of which were still looming in late April 1947. Fortunately, local officials had already dropped the charges against the three men arrested in Durham, and in May the district attorney in Asheville did the same when Curtiss Todd appealed the convictions of Peck and Banks. The three Virginia arrests were under review by the state supreme court, which would eventually rule in favor of the riders. Thus, CORE’s major concern was the fate of the four men arrested in Chapel Hill.⁷²

On May 20, two of the four defendants—Rustin and Roodenko—went on trial in the Chapel Hill Recorder’s Court. Judge Henry Whitfield, a hard-line segregationist, made no effort to hide his contempt for the defendants’ three NAACP attorneys—C. Jerry Gates, Herman Taylor, and Edward Avant. After the local prosecuting attorney, T. J. Phipps, delivered “a lengthy argument to show that the Negroes really want jimcrow,” the judge approvingly issued a guilty verdict, assessing Rustin court costs and sentencing Roodenko to thirty days on a road gang. Explaining the differential treatment, he termed Rustin “a poor mis-

71. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 22–25; Jack, “Journey of Reconciliation,” 26 (last quotation).

72. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 21–22; Peck, “Not So Deep Are the Roots,” 282; Jack, “Journey of Reconciliation,” 24; Houser, “A Personal Retrospective,” 17; *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 3, 1947; *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, May 21, 1947; *Lynchburg Advance*, April 29, 1947; Workers Defense League, “Bus Companies Urged To Obey Supreme Court Ruling Outlawing Jimcrow,” press release, typescript, May 6, 1947; “Group Finds Bus Companies Evading Supreme Court’s Anti-Jim Crow Ruling,” FOR press release, typescript, April 28, 1947, both in Bayard Rustin Files, box 51, FORP.

led nigra from the North” who bore less responsibility than white agitators who should know better, and later added a dash of anti-Semitism to his admonition. “I presume you’re Jewish, Mr. Roodenky,” drawled the judge. “Well, it’s about time you Jews from New York learned that you can’t come down here bringing your nigras with you to upset the customs of the South.” NAACP attorneys immediately filed an appeal with the Superior Court in nearby Hillsboro, but a month later Felmet and Johnson received even harsher sentences from Judge Whitfield. Johnson was fined \$50 and court costs, while Felmet, as a native Southerner and latter-day scalawag, was sentenced to six months on the road gang, six times the maximum allowed by law. When the prosecutor pointed out the error, Whitfield reluctantly reduced Felmet’s sentence to thirty days, remarking: “I can’t keep all these things in my little head.”⁷³

In March 1948, after summarily rejecting the defendants’ claimed status as interstate passengers, Superior Court Judge Chester Morris ruled that all four deserved uniform thirty-day sentences. NAACP attorneys quickly filed an appeal with the North Carolina Supreme Court, but ten months later, in January 1949, the state’s highest court, as expected, upheld the convictions and ordered the four men to return to North Carolina to serve their sentences. Rustin and Houser welcomed this ruling as the basis for an appeal to the United States Supreme Court—an appeal that would clarify and extend the nearly three-year-old *Morgan* decision. But it soon became all too apparent that NAACP leaders had no interest in filing any further appeals. Financially strapped and preoccupied with school desegregation cases and other legal challenges to Jim Crow—including the high-profile case of Norvell Lee, a former Olympic boxer who had tried to desegregate a whites-only railway coach in northern Virginia—the NAACP national office informed CORE and FOR leaders that it could neither fund nor participate in an appeal of the North Carolina Supreme Court’s decision. The NAACP claimed that a

73. Peck, “Not So Deep Are the Roots,” 274 (first quotation); *New York Times*, May 22, 1947; *Long Island Daily Press*, May 21, 1947; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 122 (second quotation); D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 168; “Chapel Hill Judge Sentences Rustin and Roodenko,” *Fellowship* (July 1947); C. Jerry Gates to Roy Wilkins, May 27, 1947, C. Jerry Gates to Thurgood Marshall, May 27, 1947, box II-B184, NAACPP; *Call*, July 2, 1947 (third quotation).

further appeal was useless because defense attorneys could no longer prove that the defendants were interstate travelers. “The black lawyer who had the ticket stubs, proving that you were interstate passengers, now claims he has lost the stubs,” Roy Wilkins, the NAACP’s assistant executive secretary, confessed to Rustin, “although we believe he was paid to destroy them.” Rustin and others suspected that the NAACP’s recalcitrance involved much more than lost ticket stubs, but there was nothing they could do to remedy the situation.⁷⁴

NAACP attorneys had never been easy to work with, and earlier disagreements over funding and strategy had prompted FOR to form an internal committee to oversee the Chapel Hill case. Some members of the committee had actually welcomed the NAACP’s disengagement, preferring to keep the struggle outside the courts. Thus, they were relieved when the defendants’ options were reduced to three choices: seeking a gubernatorial pardon, fighting extradition, or surrendering voluntarily to North Carolina authorities. After it became clear that a pardon was highly unlikely, the committee decided that the best means of demonstrating CORE’s commitment to nonviolence was to accept the sentences. Although Andrew Johnson, who was then finishing his senior year at the University of Cincinnati, declined to return to North Carolina, confessing that he was “both mentally and physically unprepared to serve thirty days on the road gang,” the other three defendants embraced the committee’s decision. Having just returned from a three-month tour of Europe and India, where he lectured on nonviolence and American race relations and met with Gandhi’s son Devadas, Rustin predicted that his impending

74. *Durham Morning Herald*, March 18, 1948; *Chicago Defender*, March 27, 1948; *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 27, 1948; *Asheville Times*, December 14, 1948; *State of North Carolina v. Johnson, et al.* (1949), Orange County, North Carolina, NC 723; “Carolina Journey Members Lose North Carolina Appeal,” *Fellowship* (February 1949): 20; “Background Statement on the North Carolina Case,” typescript, February 1949, Reel 3, Bayard Rustin Papers (Microfilm) [hereinafter BRP]; Bayard Rustin to C. Jerry Gates, May 13, June 5, 1947, reel 44, COREP; C. Jerry Gates to Roy Wilkins, May 27, 1947, C. Jerry Gates to Robert L. Carter, June 16, 1947, Robert L. Carter to C. Jerry Gates, July 25, 1947, Robert L. Carter to George Houser, August 12, 1947, all in box II-B184, NAACPP; Robert L. Carter to George Houser, February 8, 1949, “Journey of Reconciliation, 1949, Chapel Hill Case” folder, reel 44, COREP; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 122, 123 (quotation); D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 168–169. The Virginia Supreme court of Appeals later overturned Lee’s conviction. See *Norvell Lee v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1949), Record # 3558; and Martin A. Martin to George Houser, October 12, 1949, reel 44, COREP.

imprisonment would help to expose the hypocrisy of America's democratic pretensions. "Our conviction, unfortunately, is one more demonstration to the colored majority of the world of the failure of American democracy," he declared upon arriving in New York. "America cannot maintain its leadership in the struggle for world democracy as long as the conditions exist which caused our arrest and conviction. We don't fool anybody. People abroad know and are losing faith."⁷⁵

On March 21, 1949, Rustin, Felmet, and Roodenko surrendered to authorities at the Orange County Courthouse in Hillsboro, North Carolina. Assigned to the state prison camp at Roxboro, they braced themselves for thirty days of harsh punishment and humiliation. The actual sentence turned out to be only twenty-two days, thanks to an early release for good behavior, and all three men survived the ordeal. But their experiences with inhumane conditions and brutal guards at Roxboro, especially Rustin's, soon became the stuff of legend among movement activists. Following his release in mid-April, Rustin wrote "Twenty-Two Days on a Chain Gang," a searing memoir of his incarceration that was later serialized in the *New York Post* and the *Baltimore Afro-American*. Laced with dark humor—including an account of Rustin's dealings with a prison guard who kept reminding him "You ain't in Yankeeland now. We don't like no Yankee ways"—the piece shocked many readers and eventually led to a legislative investigation of conditions in North Carolina's prison camps.⁷⁶

75. C. E. Boulware to George Houser, January 18, 1949, Robert L. Carter to George Houser, February 8, 1949, Minutes of FOR/CORE Legal Committee Meeting, February 11, 1949, George Houser to Nelle Norton, February 12, 1949; Conrad Lynn to Andrew Johnson, February 14, 1949, Andrew Johnson to George Houser, March 12, 1949 (first quotation); FOR press release, typescript, March 20, 1949, all in "Journey of Reconciliation, 1949, Chapel Hill Case" folder, reel 44, COREP; George Houser to Dear Fellows, November 13, 1948, George Houser to Bayard Rustin, November 20, 1948, reel 3, BRP; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 123, 130–134; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 164–165; "Negro Acclaimed at Home and Abroad Sentenced to North Carolina Road Gang," FOR/CORE press release, typescript, March 9, 1949, Bayard Rustin Files, box 51, FORP (second quotation).

76. Rustin, *Down the Line*, 26–49, 29 (quotation); Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 135–136; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 170; Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 61–65. See also the correspondence and clippings (including the *New York Post* series) in reel 3, BRP; and the reports and correspondence in the Roxboro Prison Report folders, Bayard Rustin Files, box 51, FORP.

This unexpected benefit pleased Rustin and his CORE colleagues, but as the decade drew to a close it was all too obvious that the Journey of Reconciliation's primary objective remained unfulfilled. While the first freedom ride had demonstrated the viability of nonviolent direct action in the upper South, it had not precipitated wholesale desegregation or even protest on a mass scale. With few exceptions, company rules and social inertia still kept the races apart on interstate buses and trains; and no one, other than a few die-hard optimists, expected the situation to change anytime soon. As it had done so many times in the past, the shape-shifting monster known as Jim Crow had adapted to changing legal and political realities without sacrificing the cold heart of racial discrimination. Irene Morgan and the CORE activists who followed her lead would have to wait a bit longer for the day of jubilee.⁷⁷

77. Houser, "A Personal Retrospective," 17–21; Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 27; Bayard Rustin, "From Freedom Ride to Ballot Box: The Changing Strategies of Black Struggle," typescript of lecture delivered as part of the William Radner Lecture Series, Columbia University, October 9–11, 1973, section 31, reel 18, BRP; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 123; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 38–39; Barnes, *Journey From Jim Crow*, 60–65; Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 64–67; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 170; Tracy, *Direct Action*, 56.