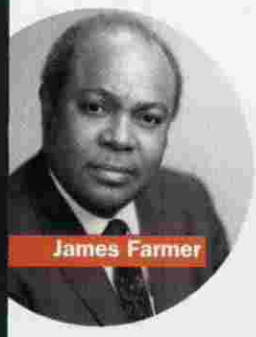

James Farmer

James Farmer was certain he was going to die. What he feared, however, was what the mob might do to him *before* he died. He had seen photographs of lynching victims. Many had been tortured before being hanged or burned....

The Greyhound bus sat motionless and crippled at the side of the road. The angry mob that surrounded the bus was shouting and smashing its windows with bricks and pipes. James Farmer and the other Freedom Riders were trapped inside. Someone hurled a firebomb through one of the windows, and the bus exploded into flames. Staying inside meant being burned alive. Crawling through the windows meant facing the mob.

"I hoped the reporters were out there," Farmer has written. "Plenty of them. With plenty of cameras."

The media were not there yet. And, when they did arrive, the stories and photographs they published would tell only a part of the story.

What happened to the Greyhound bus outside Anniston, Alabama, on May 14, 1961? To answer that question means to investigate multiple sources of information. In the process, you will learn an important researching and writing skill: how to interpret documents from history.

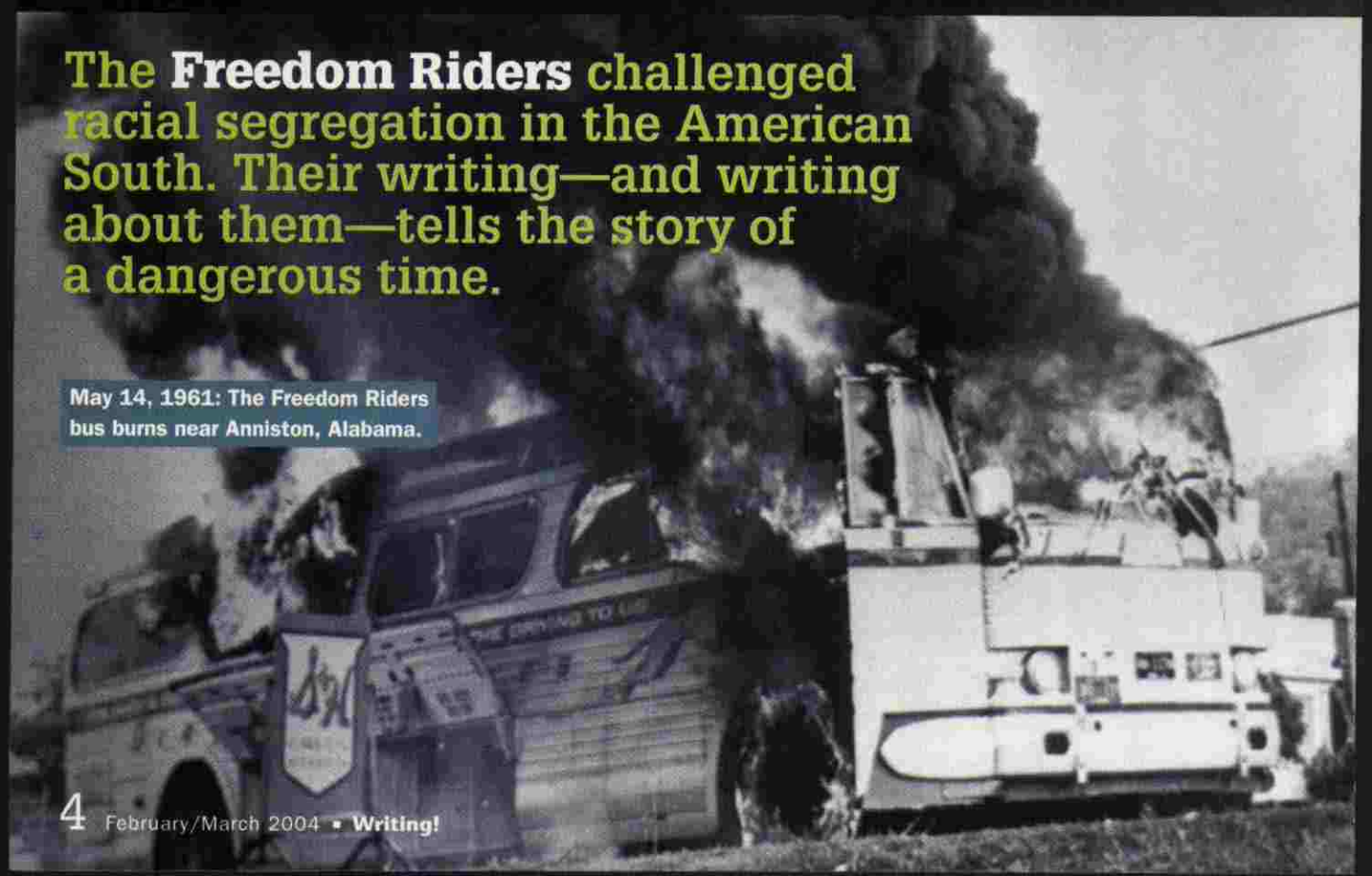
Who Were the Freedom Riders?

The Freedom Riders were activists in the civil rights movement, the campaign to win legal equality for African Americans that fought its most dramatic battles in the 1950s and 1960s. They had a goal: to desegregate public facilities in the American South. They

Top: Archive Photos; bottom: AP Photo

They *Risked*

The Freedom Riders challenged racial segregation in the American South. Their writing—and writing about them—tells the story of a dangerous time.



May 14, 1961: The Freedom Riders bus burns near Anniston, Alabama.

had a plan. And they made no secret of that plan.

"We wrote to the Justice Department, to the FBI, and to the President," says James Farmer. "We wrote to the Greyhound Bus Company and Trailways Bus Company."

In those letters, six white and seven black men—including Farmer—explained what they intended to do. They would board buses in Washington, D.C., and ride through Virginia, then North Carolina, and then through the Deep South to New Orleans, Louisiana. At rest stops along the way, they would ignore the "whites only" and "colored only" signs posted at snack bars, in waiting rooms, and on restroom doors. The whites would enter the areas designated for blacks. The blacks would enter the areas reserved for whites.

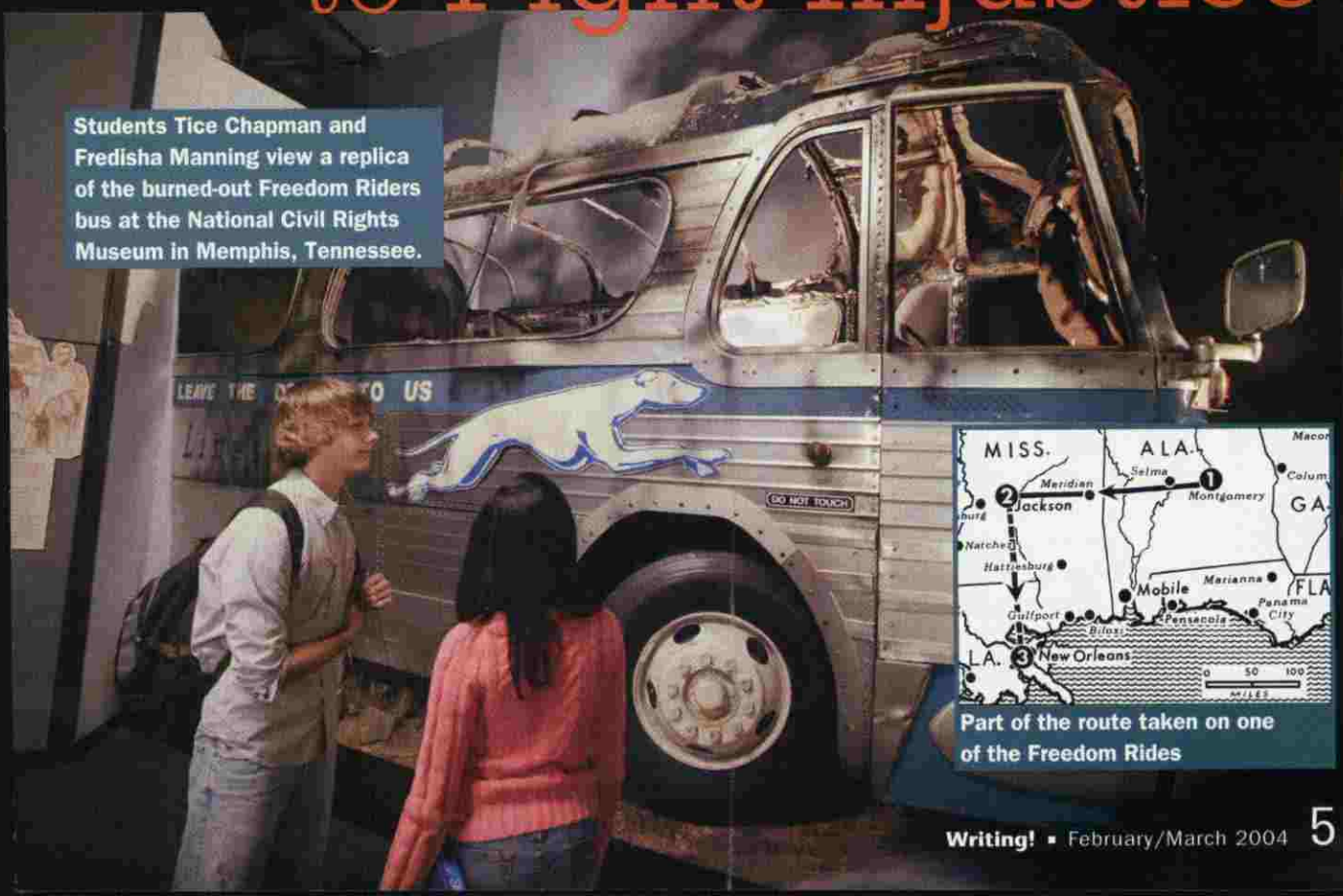
The activists would not be breaking any laws. A year earlier, in 1960, the United States Supreme Court had ruled that segregation on interstate transportation and in terminals was illegal and ordered states to end it. But some states had ignored the Supreme Court ruling. The purpose of the "Freedom Ride" was to pressure authorities to enforce the desegregation law.

The 13 travelers expected trouble. They knew they would be insulted and possibly physically attacked. They also knew that, if the Ride were to succeed, they could not fight back. They had to be nonviolent.

On May 4, 1961, two buses left the terminal in Washington, D.C., and headed south. Would the buses—and their riders—arrive in New Orleans? →

Steve Jones; inset photo: © Bettmann/CORBIS

Their Lives to Fight Injustice



Students Tice Chapman and Fredisha Manning view a replica of the burned-out Freedom Riders bus at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee.

Part of the route taken on one of the Freedom Rides

Researching vs. Interpreting History

To research a story, writers need to know how to find the right historical documents. These may include eyewitness accounts, letters, newspaper articles, and photographs. Some documents can be found in library archives or on reliable Web sites, like those of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the Library of Congress.

For some researchers, sources are quite near at hand. Students in Anniston, Alabama, for example, only need to drive out to the interstate to see exactly where the Freedom Riders' bus was burned back in May 1961.

Other researchers can take advantage of museums built to display the artifacts of history. People who live near Memphis, Tennessee, can visit the National Civil Rights Museum to see impressive and enlightening exhibits about the Freedom Riders (pictured on the cover and on page 5 of this issue of *Writing!*) and other key events in the movement's history. Students everywhere can visit the museum Web site at *www.civilrightsmuseum.org*.

Finding materials, however, is just the first step. Researchers have to interpret their sources. They must analyze the documents and draw conclusions about them. A document may be authentic—but that doesn't mean it is completely accurate. Historical documents are created by people who may have a bias, or prejudice, about their subject.

Opinions often creep into the news, says CNN journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault. To arrive at the truth, a writer must process information from a variety of sources. The more perspectives a writer investigates, says Hunter-Gault, the closer the writer will come to discovering what really happened.

Hunter-Gault grew up in the segregated South. During the same year as the Freedom Rides, she fought and won her own desegregation battle. She was the first of two African Americans admitted to the University of Georgia in its 175-year history. As a writer, she has learned that objectivity is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

"All writers come out of sets of experiences and backgrounds that are going to cause them to see things slightly differently," she explains. As a journalist, she says, "You're supposed to just go out there and cover the story. But that never happens.... I will see things that another [journalist] will not see."

The first step in interpreting historical documents is identifying the author. Who wrote the letter, or news article, or pamphlet? Who took the photograph? What is his or her point of view about the subject? The second step is identifying the document's purpose. Is the purpose of this story or photograph to inform? Or is it to persuade, to express feelings, or even to entertain?

A Timeline of the Civil Rights Movement

1954
Brown vs. Board of Education outlaws segregated schools.

1955
Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat spurs the Montgomery bus boycott.

1960
Lunch counter sit-ins lead to desegregation of public facilities.

1961
Freedom Riders' crusade leads to enforcement of laws against segregation on interstate transportation.

Separate But Equal?

William Mahoney was a student at Howard University in Washington, D.C., when he volunteered to become a Freedom Rider. He later wrote about his experience in *Liberation* magazine.

> At our first stop in Virginia, I was confronted with what the Southern white has called "separate but equal." A modern rest station with gleaming counters and picture windows was labeled "White," and a small wooden shack beside it was

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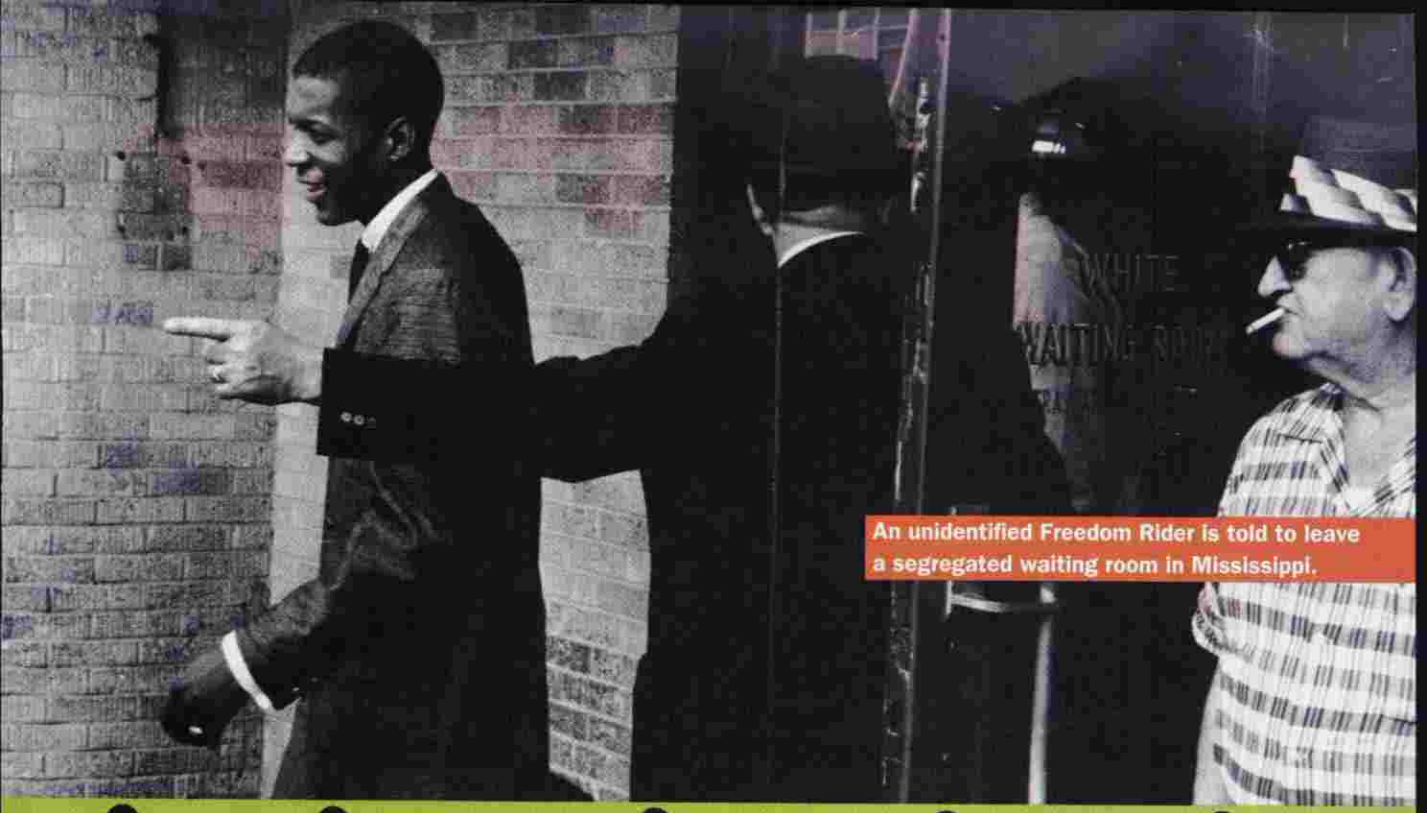


An unidentified Freedom Rider is told to leave a segregated waiting room in Mississippi.

1962
James Meredith integrates the University of Mississippi.

1963
Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech caps huge demonstration in Washington, D.C.

Four African American girls die in bombing of a Birmingham church.

1964
Martin Luther King, Jr., is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

1965
Voting Rights Act is passed by U.S. Congress.

Demonstrators march from Montgomery to Selma, Alabama, to push for equality.

1967
Thurgood Marshall is appointed first African American Supreme Court justice.

> tagged "Colored." The colored waiting room was filthy, in need of repair, and overcrowded. When we entered the white waiting room, Frank Hunt [another Freedom Rider] was promptly but courteously, in the Southern manner, asked to leave. Because I am a fair-skinned Negro, I was waited upon. I walked back to the bus through the cool night, trembling and perspiring.

Mahoney's purpose is to inform—but also to persuade readers of the injustice of segregation. He shows that "separate but equal" was not equal. He makes us shake our heads over the fact that the way people were treated was determined, openly, by the shade of their skin.

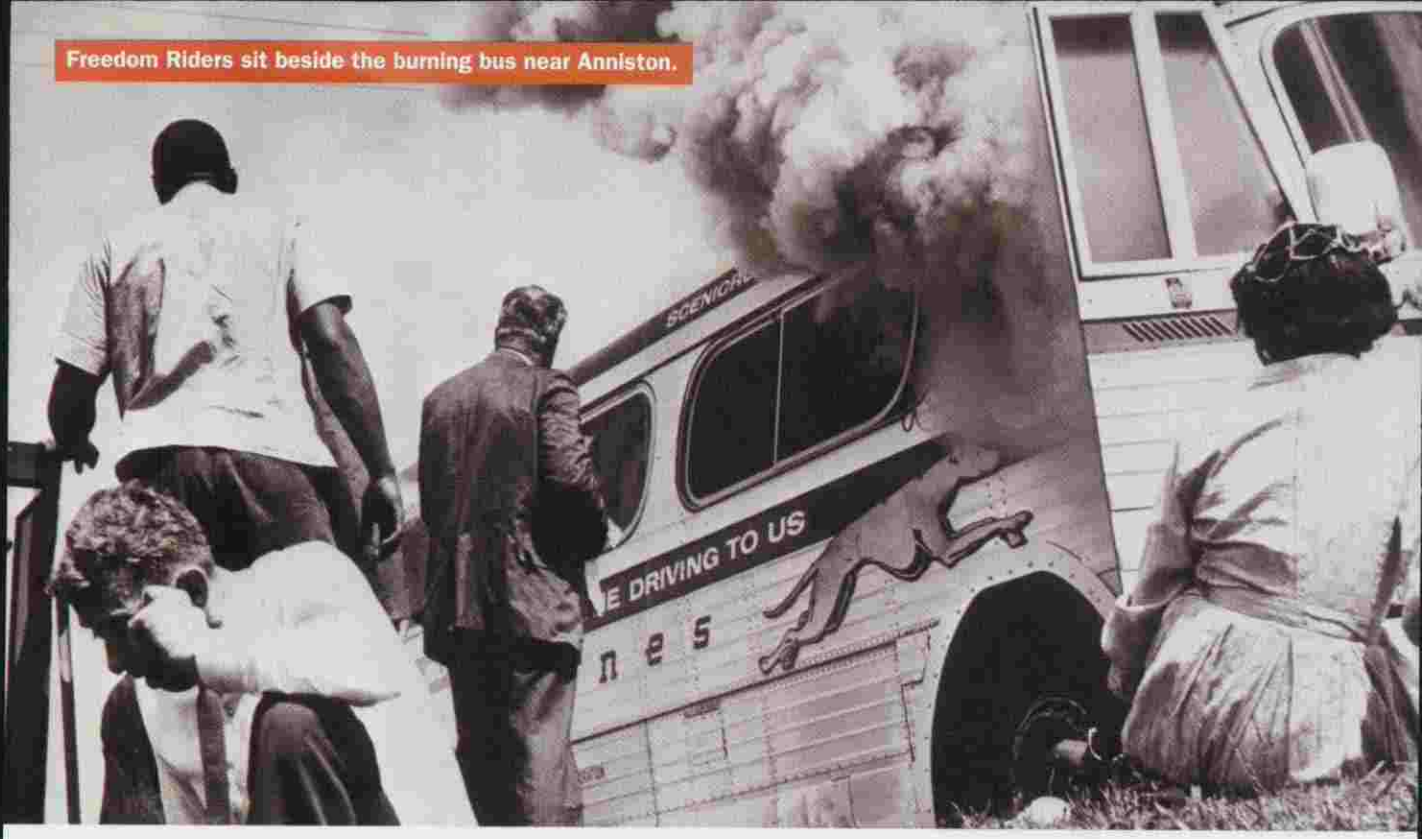
The Fury of the Mob

Days after the events Mahoney described, violence erupted hundreds of miles from the Virginia bus stop, in Anniston. The May 15, 1961, edition of the *Jackson* (Mississippi) *Daily* ran this headline about the incident: BUS MIXERS ARE BEATEN. A caption under two photographs read:

> TROUBLE FOR BUS MIXERS—Group of integrationists traveling through the South in a publicized test of segregation practices met violence Sunday in Alabama. Top photo, one white man sits in front of bus to prevent it from leaving Anniston. Bus was later stopped by flat tire outside Anniston and was set afire and burned (bottom photo). Passengers got off without serious injury—Daily News-AP Wire photos.

How to interpret this caption, which presents key facts and is all that many readers will read? The writer seems to be trying to be objective—but the writing shows the prejudices of its time. "Integrationists" meant "troublemakers" in →

top: Getty Images/Hulton Archive; center: Archive Photos



Freedom Riders sit beside the burning bus near Anniston.

the white South. "Bus mixers" certainly had a disapproving tone in a time when white politicians railed against efforts of pro-integration forces to "mix the races." Also, the caption evades a key question: How did the bus *get* that flat tire? The writer leaves out that the tires were damaged by the angry mob.

Compare that account with this one from a book by Kenneth O'Reilly, a historian who had access to previously secret FBI documents that were made available to scholars in 1972:

> When the Greyhound parked for its scheduled fifteen-minute rest stop, an angry mob surrounded it and began smashing windows and slashing tires. Police officers diverted the mob and the bus pulled out, but Ku Kluxers [members of the violent racist group, the Ku Klux Klan] pursued in cars, catching up to the bus six miles out of town, when the tires either went flat from the earlier slashing or were shot out. A homemade bomb came through one of the windows. The bus quickly filled with smoke. The passengers tried to flee, but the mob held the door shut. The realization that the bus might explode finally forced them to back up, and they beat the riders as they left the bus.

O'Reilly's purpose is to use his sources to create an accurate historical record. He may not be perfectly objective either, but his account is fuller and fairer.

On to Montgomery

Despite the violence in Anniston, the Freedom Ride continued. In Montgomery, Alabama, the worst of the violence struck. John Lewis, now a United States congressman from Georgia, was then a college student and Freedom Rider. He recalled the violence he experienced in an interview with CNN:

> We were beaten in Birmingham and later met by an angry mob in Montgomery, where I was hit in the head with a wooden crate. It was very violent. I thought I was going to die. I was left lying at the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery, unconscious.

As a historical document, this snippet of interview is filled with facts—and with feelings. John Lewis did not die. Neither did James Farmer or any of the Riders. But the dangers were great. As the Rides continued, so did the violence. Newspaper articles and photographs on front pages of newspapers across the country shocked Americans. Farmer ended the Ride in Montgomery—but the protest had just begun.

Hundreds of civil rights activists volunteered to embark on more Freedom Rides throughout the summer. More Riders boarded buses—

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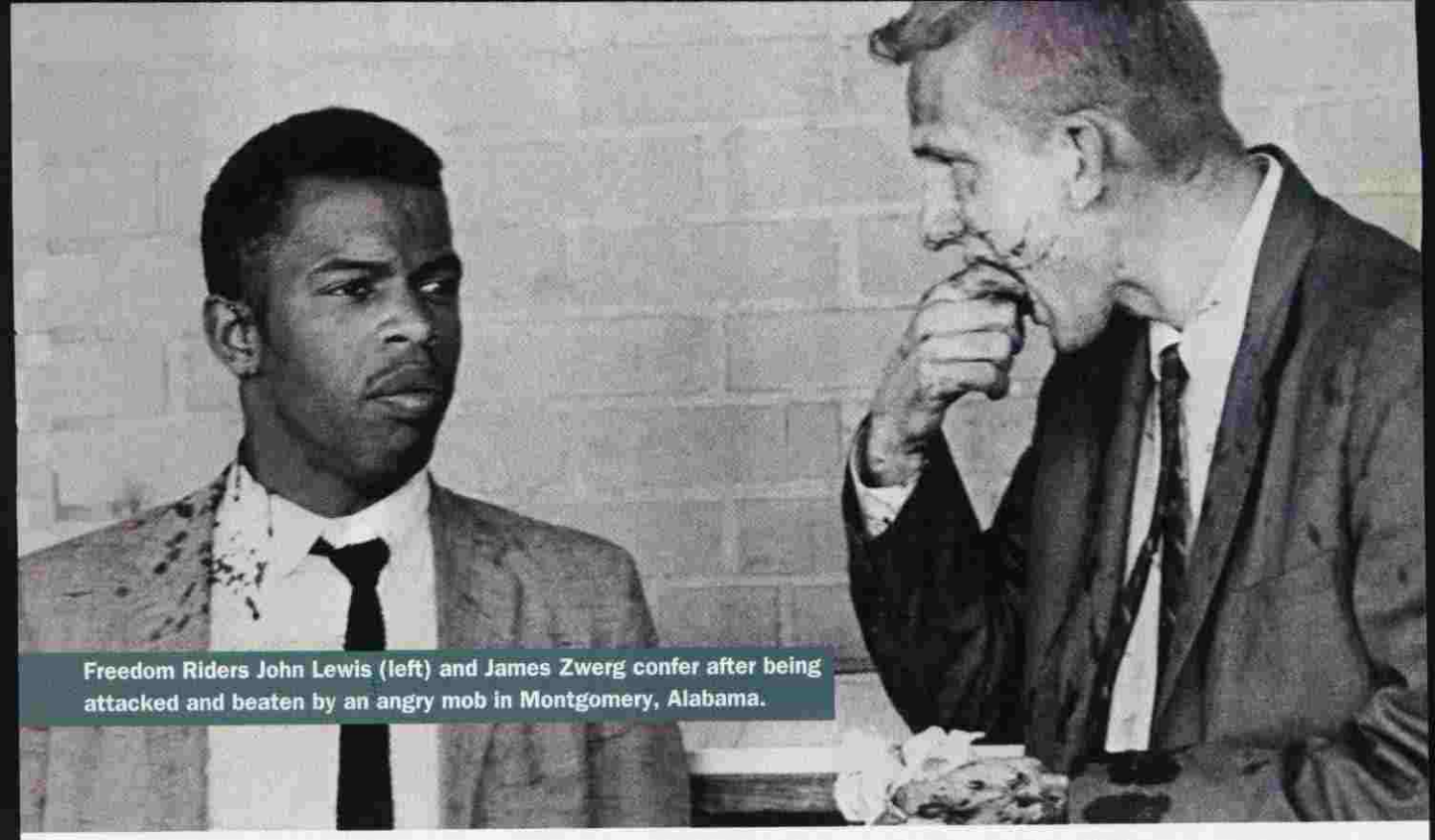

Freedom Riders John Lewis (left) and James Zwerg confer after being attacked and beaten by an angry mob in Montgomery, Alabama.

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male and female, white and black. Some were as young as their late teens.

A Nation's Conscience

The Freedom Riders accomplished their goal. Public disgust over the treatment they received helped to spur government action. Attorney General Robert Kennedy pressured bus companies and government agencies to protect the Riders. And, by the end of the summer, the Interstate Commerce Commission had outlawed segregation of transportation facilities in a ruling more specific than the Supreme Court decision. "Whites only" and "blacks only" signs began to disappear.

The Freedom Rides of 1961 were a key chapter in the history of the American civil rights movement. Writing about them captures the moment for future generations.

—Catherine Gourley

WRITE AWAY

Putting It Together

The Freedom Rides were one of many milestones in the civil rights movement of the early 1960s. Select one of these events:

- On February 1, 1960, four black college students sit down at the whites-only lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina.
- In 1962, James Meredith becomes the first African American to enter the University of Mississippi.
- In 1963, the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, kills four African American girls.

To create a research paper on the event you selected or on any of the others mentioned on the timeline (pp. 6-7), follow this procedure:

1. Locate at least three historical documents about the protest.
2. Next, interpret the documents. Analyze the language and selection of details for bias or point of view. Draw a conclusion about each document's purpose.
3. Finally, synthesize your conclusions into a report.

Then, write about the feelings that go along with the facts. How does what you have discovered through research make you feel about the event? How are those feelings reflected in your report?

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