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Staff Photos by Jason Arthurs



A new historical marker stands where the riders stopped and marched in Chapel Hill 62 years ago. Eugene Farrar, center, president of the Chapel Hill NAACP, presided. One of the 16 riders, George Houser, 92, attended.

And

Marchers parade down Franklin Street as the bus riders of 1947 did. The march on Saturday ended where the old bus station once stood.

Town celebrates visit of 'freedom riders' in 1947

Chapel Hill honors the biracial group that marched and faced arrests, assault and threats

Lynn Bonner, Staff Writer [Comment on this story](#)

CHAPEL HILL - Fourteen years before the 1961 Freedom Rides became a touchstone of the civil rights movement, a group of black and white riders endured violence and threats at a bus stop in Chapel Hill.

The town commemorated the events of 1947, called the Journey of Reconciliation, in a ceremony Saturday sponsored by the Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP and the Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist.

The ceremony remembering the early efforts to end segregation included a march along Franklin Street to a corner where the bus station once stood. A historical marker was unveiled there.

George Houser, a co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, the civil rights group that organized the bus rides, remembered the tour through the upper South. It tested compliance with a 1946 U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing forced segregation on interstate bus travel.

Houser, now 92, came from his home in New York to participate in the ceremony.

Sixteen riders, eight black and eight white, left Washington on April 9 and arrived in Chapel Hill three days later.

The riders were invited to Chapel Hill, Houser said, and the first day in town went as planned. The group arrived on a Saturday, and they had a meeting on the University of North Carolina campus and at the First Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill.

"We thought that Chapel Hill was going to be real easy on us," Houser said. "Chapel Hill had a liberal reputation."

On Sunday, though, four riders were taken from the bus and arrested, and another was assaulted by a cab driver.

Houser bailed out the four jailed riders. Charles Jones, minister at the First Presbyterian Church, drove them to his home. Two cars full of taxi drivers followed.

Soon after the riders arrived at Jones' home, someone called threatening to burn the house.

The riders left Chapel Hill for Greensboro by car.

The four riders who were arrested in Chapel Hill were later sentenced to 30 days on the chain gang. One of them was Bayard Rustin, a chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.

Rustin wrote about his days on the chain gang, and his account led to the elimination of chain gangs in the state, said Yonni Chapman, chairman of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP history committee.

Chapel Hill had people like Jones, University of North Carolina President Frank Porter Graham, and others who worked with students to break the color barrier. "Those are the ones you hear about," Chapman said. But most of the town was segregated, and the university had no black students.

"That was the reality, and the reality sort of jumped out in people's faces," he said.

The 1947 freedom ride did not gain the attention given to the 1961 bus rides through the South, when buses were firebombed and the riders beaten and arrested.

But the Chapel Hill violence was covered extensively by the university newspaper, The Daily Tar Heel, and started a campus debate. About 1,000 people attended a meeting with the campus and the community, Chapman said. Fraternities and sororities debated Jim Crow, a subject that had been taboo, he said.

Saturday, Houser followed the marchers in a van, passing police cars that had blocked traffic for the procession. The town endorsed the commemoration and the march.

"It's kind of a way of saying, 'We're sorry it happened,' isn't it?" Houser said.

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