

In 1961, William Harbour was nineteen years old, from Piedmont, Alabama, and determined to be the first person in his family to attend college. He enrolled at Tennessee State University. Immediately, he joined efforts to end racial segregation.

That May, the Congress of Racial Equality planned to racially integrate interstate travel. Harbour, and a dozen others, volunteered to ride from Washington, DC, through the Deep South, to New Orleans, Louisiana.

Harbour and the first group of Freedom Riders faced terrorists in Alabama. In Anniston white supremacists blocked the doors and firebombed the bus with the freedom riders onboard. In Birmingham, hundreds surrounded the bus and beat the Freedom Riders bloody. Local police looked the other way and sometimes joined the terrorists. State law enforcement, led by the governor, provided no protection, called the Freedom Riders “agitators,” and blamed them for causing the violence. In Montgomery, police arrested Harbour and the other Freedom Riders, removed them from the jail in the middle of the night, drove them to the state line, and abandoned them.

But, like a tree standing by the waterside, they would not be moved.

William Harbour and the Freedom Riders boarded another bus.

They were determined to reach New Orleans and prove that black citizens could enjoy equal protection of the law in the United States. In Jackson, Mississippi, they were arrested, tried, and sentenced to over thirty days of hard time in the state penitentiary.

The Freedom Rides continued.

Over four hundred people participated. Over three hundred were incarcerated in the Mississippi state penitentiary. They suffered beatings, torture, job loss, social ostracism, and expulsion from schools.

Six months after William Harbour started the Freedom Rides, the federal government ended racially segregated interstate travel. William Harbour’s courage and sacrifice made the United States a nation where equal protection under the law had meaning.

For decades, Harbour worked as a public servant. He became a steward of the Freedom Riders’ history. He received an honorary degree from the university that had expelled him. He died in August 2020.

President Rose, on behalf of the College, it is my honor to present, posthumously, William Harbour, a soldier from the nation’s nonviolent army for freedom and citizenship, for the degree of doctor of humane letters, *honoris causa*.