



The STORY of the 1947 - 1949

FREEDOM TRAIN

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THE 1947 - 1949 FREEDOM TRAIN

MORE THAN A SYMBOL: UPHOLDING A CREED

In the late 1940's, many black Americans and other minorities had returned home in the wartime uniforms of service to their country, only to face the expectation that they should "know their place" as disenfranchised, second-class citizens.

Most accounts describe the opening events of the Civil Rights Movement as beginning a decade and more after the Freedom Train's historic journey. But the train played a role in bringing the message of freedom and equality for all Americans, regardless of race, creed or color.

Birmingham, Alabama was a scheduled display stop for the Freedom Train. But city officials there revealed plans for "separate but equal" times for whites and blacks to visit the train, in accordance with the city's racially segregated schools, buses, restaurants, and all other facilities available for public access.

The American Heritage Foundation, the Freedom Train's operating organization, told the leaders of Birmingham that such a plan was unacceptable, and an insult to all that the train represented.

The Freedom Train did not visit Birmingham, and the resulting message was clear.

Following the incident, no other city attempted to segregate visitors, and the train hosted visitors of all races and ethnicity, young and old, in a "priority" determined only by who arrived first to wait in line. It was a preview of the America we take for granted today, often without thinking about a time when equal opportunity and freedom of access were anything but society's accepted standards.

Far from being a contrived symbol of an idealized America, the Freedom Train took a proactive part in the hopes of President Truman and Attorney General Clark for a national "rededication" and a reckoning by individual citizens of what it means to be an American and to subscribe to the American Dream.

Thus, Birmingham – the display date that was not kept – is a fine representation of the greatest impact of the Freedom Train.

Text by Mr. Larry Wines.

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