

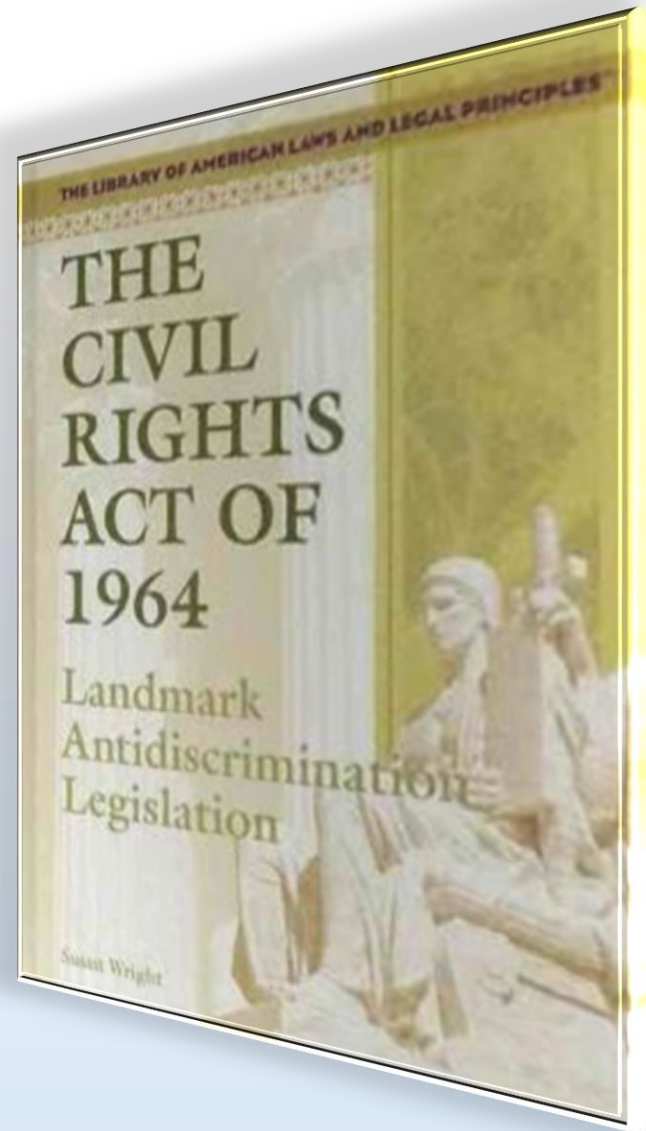
# 8 Steps that Paved the Way to the Civil Right Act of 1964

Jessica Pierce Rondi from The History Channel  
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# The Civil Rights Act



The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. When it was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 2, 1964, it was a major victory for the civil rights movement in its battle against unjust Jim Crow laws that marginalized Black Americans. It took years of activism, courage, and the leadership of Civil Rights icons from Martin Luther King, Jr. to the Little Rock Nine to bring the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to fruition. These are eight key steps that ultimately led to the Act's adoption.



# Step 1.



## Brown v. Board of Education



The 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education declared that segregating children in public schools was unconstitutional, setting a critical precedent that “separate but equal” facilities were not equal in the eyes of the law. “It provided a constitutional framework from which the Civil Rights Act could grow,” says Charles McKinney, Director of Africana Studies and Associate Professor of History, Rhodes College. In practice, however, segregation was far from over: “The South was stonewalling, and the federal government was ambivalent about enforcement,” says McKinney.

# Step 2.

## The Montgomery Bus Boycott

“The story of the Civil Rights Act is not the story of how a bill became a law, but the story of the power of broad-based activism to change the mind of the public,” says Clay Risen, reporter with the *New York Times* and author of *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act*.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted over a year, from December 5, 1955 to December 20, 1956. It was sparked by the arrest of Rosa Parks, a Black woman who refused to give up her seat on a public bus to a white man.



“To work, it required everyone’s participation in the Black community. It was not just a boycott, but coordinating carpools, daycare, meals. It showed white Americans that the Civil Rights movement wasn’t limited to fringe activists, but had the widespread, sustained support of the community,” says Risen. The boycott led to the Supreme Court ordering the desegregation of buses and brought a new Civil Rights leader into the national spotlight: Martin Luther King, Jr.





# Step 3.



## Greensboro Sit-In

The Greensboro Sit-In begun at a Woolworth's counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, when young Black men known as the "Greensboro Four" continued to occupy their seats after being refused service. Their peaceful act of resistance quickly spread across the country: "All of the places that are segregated become fair game: Students are having read-ins in segregated libraries, swim-ins in segregated pools, pray-ins in segregated churches



National corporations suddenly need to account for why they're giving into segregation in their Southern chains. It expands the range of the theater where action can unfurl," McKinney says.

# Step 4.



## The Little Rock Nine



The Little Rock Nine was a group of Black students sent to integrate the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957. Their enrollment was a test of 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education*. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called in the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the students from entering. It would take federal troops sent in by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to safely escort the Little Rock Nine into the classroom. The governor's military intervention and footage of protestors spitting on the students provoked nationwide outrage that increased public support for civil rights.

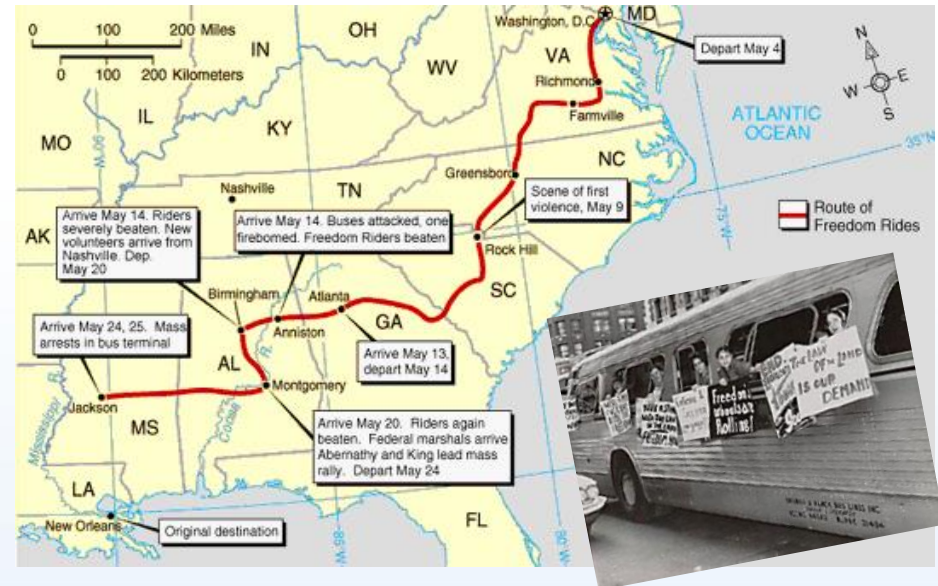
# Step 5.



## Freedom Riders

In 1961, Freedom Riders, a group of Black and white protestors organized by the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), attempted to use whites-only restrooms, lunch counters and waiting rooms, testing the 1960 Supreme Court decision in Boynton v. Virginia that ruled segregation of interstate transportation facilities unconstitutional.

“This is where you start to see more substantive involvement of the federal government. Sit-ins are a state matter, a city matter. Activists in '61 are explicit: The object is to create constitutional confrontations to force the hand of the



federal government,” McKinney says. “The freedom riders are covered under federal law. They’re not breaking a law, yet they’re getting arrested, harassed, and beaten on national television while the federal government is dithering. It’s a moment that implicates Washington and asks, ‘What are you going to do?’” says McKinney.

# Step 6.

## The March on Washington

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963 saw 250,000 protestors gather in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. in the wake of high-profile protests in Birmingham, Alabama and Jackson, Mississippi.

“What King did through 1963 was create the context in which the bill could happen,” says Risen. “The Birmingham protests showed the strength of nonviolence by getting in the face of police and the white



business community and in front of cameras. King understood very well the need to show the brutality of the system to the entire world,” says Risen. “People saw children shoved into police vans, the horrors of dogs set on protesters, Medgar Evers assassinated in Jackson. It forced people nationwide to stop looking away.”





Famous performers like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan accompanied speakers like Walter Reuther, head of the United Auto Workers and the leading voice of labor; John Lewis and King himself, who gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech that day. “It was a demonstration of moral strength by a huge number of people and a wide range of liberal leaders,” says Risen. “It marked an apogee of broad public support for the bill when it needed it most, giving it momentum as it moved through Congress.”

# Step 7.



## Freedom Summer of 1964

The Freedom Summer of 1964 was a voter registration drive for Black voters across Mississippi who faced harassment and intimidation at the polls. “The vote was absolutely essential to the passage of any legislation and to any politicians taking notice of the needs of Black people in the south at the federal or local level,” says Judy Richardson, civil rights movement activist, educator, filmmaker (*Eyes on the Prize* series), and staff member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). “You don’t get the Civil Rights Act without the Kennedy administration understanding Black southerners are a powerful source of votes.”

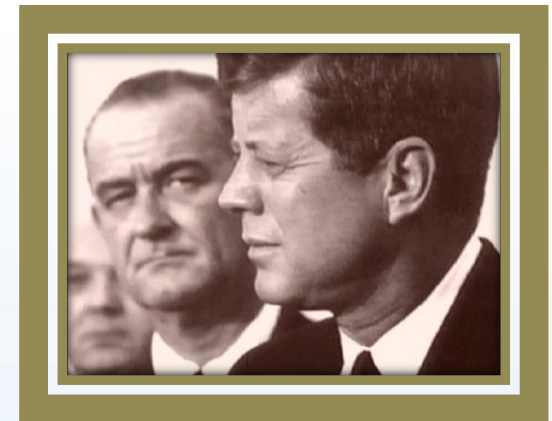


# Step 8.



## Assassination of John F. Kennedy

In June 1963, President Kennedy introduced a civil rights bill and went on national television to say that the United States “will not be fully free until all of its citizens are free.” When he was assassinated on November 22, 1963, his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, took up the cause. “It took the assassination of Kennedy and Johnson wrapping himself in the mantle of Kennedy, claiming this is Kennedy’s legacy, to force through the Civil Rights Act in the Senate” says McKinney. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law on July 2, 1964, bringing King’s dream and the dreams of thousands of activists and allies one step closer to reality.





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