

# James Peck

1914–1993



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** James Peck helped organize the National Maritime Union, worked with the Congress of Racial Equality, and was a Freedom Rider. He was a pacifist committed to justice and peace.



*As you read the biography below, think about James Peck's commitment to racial equality. Why do you think this was one of the issues that mattered most to him?*



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As the civil rights movement continued, so did the number of protests. The 1960s were marked by sit-ins, boycotts, and marches. Many of these protests were nonviolent. James Peck, like Martin Luther King Jr., was an advocate of Gandhi's principles of nonviolent protest.

James Peck was born in 1914 in Manhattan, New York. He was the son of a well-to-do clothing wholesaler and grew up attending the finest schools. Peck enrolled in Harvard University in 1932 but dropped out a year later because he wanted to work actively in social issues.

In the mid-1930s Peck became a seaman and helped establish the National Maritime Union. During a strike in 1936, Peck was badly beaten by anti-unionists. The incident did not dampen his resolve to fight for union workers; soon after, Peck began reporting on union activities for an independent news service.

Peck was a conscientious objector during World War II. He worked for the War Resisters League and wrote a newspaper column for the *Conscientious Objector*. Peck spent two years in prison for his antiwar activism. During that time he organized a successful protest against racial segregation in the prison dining hall. Within a month, the dining hall was desegregated.

Peck continued to be an outspoken peace activist. In 1947 he burned draft cards outside the White House and participated in one of the first major civil rights protests. He also took part in a two-week bus ride through the South known as the Journey of Reconciliation. Eight black men and eight white men traveled together to test the Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in interstate travel unconstitutional. Southern officials did not enforce the Court's ruling, and Peck and others were beaten and arrested during the ride.

## The Civil Rights Movement

## Biography

In 1961, when Peck was serving as editor for the newsletter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), he took part in the Freedom Rides. These rides, like the Journey of Reconciliation, were designed to test whether blacks and whites could travel together across state lines. The buses were attacked in Alabama, and Peck was beaten once again. More than 20 years later, he won a \$25,000 lawsuit against the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) because the agency had been warned of possible violence but did not protect the Freedom Riders.

Peck remained a civil rights activist for most of his life. He died in 1993 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Define** What were the Freedom Rides, and why were they important?

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2. **Analyze** What do you think is the main contribution that Peck will be remembered for?

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### ACTIVITY

James Peck was an outspoken peace activist and supporter of civil rights. If he were alive now, what issues do you think he would focus on? List several social issues that are important today. Then choose one you feel strongly about and write a paragraph summarizing your position on the issue.