



Henry “Hank” James Thomas was born on August 29, 1941 in Jacksonville, Florida. Thomas spent most of his childhood in St. Augustine, Florida. He started protesting racial injustices very early in life. In the novel *Breach of Peace*, Thomas explains that “rebellion came natural” to him. He recalls that at age 9 or 10, he corrected a white insurance man who addressed his aunt using her first name only, not her last. Later on, when blacks were not allowed to check out books in the library, Thomas would take his own books there to read.

As he grew up, he participated in sit-ins, and sat in white seats on local buses. Thomas went to college at Howard University in Washington D.C. Here he was an active participant in the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). His goal for Civil Rights became even stronger as he heard about the sit-in movements going on in Greensboro. Inspired by these movements, Thomas helped to organize, as well as participated in, early movements in Maryland and in Virginia.

On May 4, 1961, Hank Thomas joined the first Freedom Rider group. Originally, he was not going to participate, but his roommate, who was supposed to partake in the event, got sick and was unable to attend. Thomas took his place. The rides went as expected until May 14, Mothers’ Day, of 1961. The Greyhound bus Thomas was riding made its way into Anniston, Alabama where the bus was set upon by Klansmen and burned. The first Freedom Ride ended shortly after the events in Anniston. Although Thomas was injured, and injected with a sense of fear, he participated in a second Freedom Ride from Montgomery, Alabama to Jackson, Mississippi 10 days later. This time, he was incarcerated and served time at the Parchman State Prison Farm. Thomas was soon after released on bail, and on August 22, 1961, he became the first rider to appeal his conviction for the breach of peace. Hank Thomas is one of four surviving members of the thirteen original “Freedom Riders”.