

BACKGROUND ON BARBARA ROSE JOHNS

Barbara Rose Johns (1935 -1991) Librarian

Five court cases were consolidated to create the landmark school desegregation case, Brown v. Board of Education decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. Barbara Rose Johns was the catalyst for one of the cases based in Virginia, Davis v. County School Board. The other four cases were Belton (Bulah) v. Gebhart [Delaware], Bolling v. Sharpe [District of Columbia], Brown v. Board of Education [Kansas], and Briggs v. Elliott [South Carolina]. The Davis case was the only one of the five initiated by student action.

In April 1951, Barbara Rose Johns, a 16-year-old high school student in Farmville, Virginia, organized a student strike to protest poor school conditions. Four hundred fifty African American students from Moton High School participated in the two-week protest. The student strike committee requested assistance from the NAACP branch office in Richmond, Virginia. The students believed that the deplorable conditions at the school deprived them of equal educational opportunities. Moton had no gymnasium, cafeteria, infirmary or teachers restrooms, and the overflow of students was housed in an old school bus and three buildings covered in tar paper. Local parents had repeatedly sought improvements from the local school board without success.

In May 1951, Spottswood Robinson and Oliver Hill from the local NAACP filed suit on behalf of one hundred seventeen students. The plaintiffs asked that the state law requiring segregated schools in Virginia be struck down. A three-judge panel at the U.S. District Court unanimously rejected the students' request stating, "We have found no hurt or harm to either race." The school board was ordered to proceed with plans to equalize the African American students' school. When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the ruling and ordered desegregation, white Virginians launched a campaign of massive resistance. The Board of Supervisors for Prince Edward County refused to appropriate any funds for the County School Board for the period 1959-1964, effectively closing the public schools rather than integrate them. Prince Edward County schools remained closed for five years.

www.nps.gov/brvb/learn/historyculture/virginia.htm

Following the student strike, Johns was sent away from the volatile situation in Farmville to live with relatives in Alabama. She finished school and married William Powell, with whom she raised five children. She earned a master's degree from Drexel University and worked as a librarian in the Philadelphia Public Schools. Today, a monument at Richmond's Capitol Square commemorates the efforts of Barbara Johns Powell and the students of Moton High School in leading the fight for civil rights.

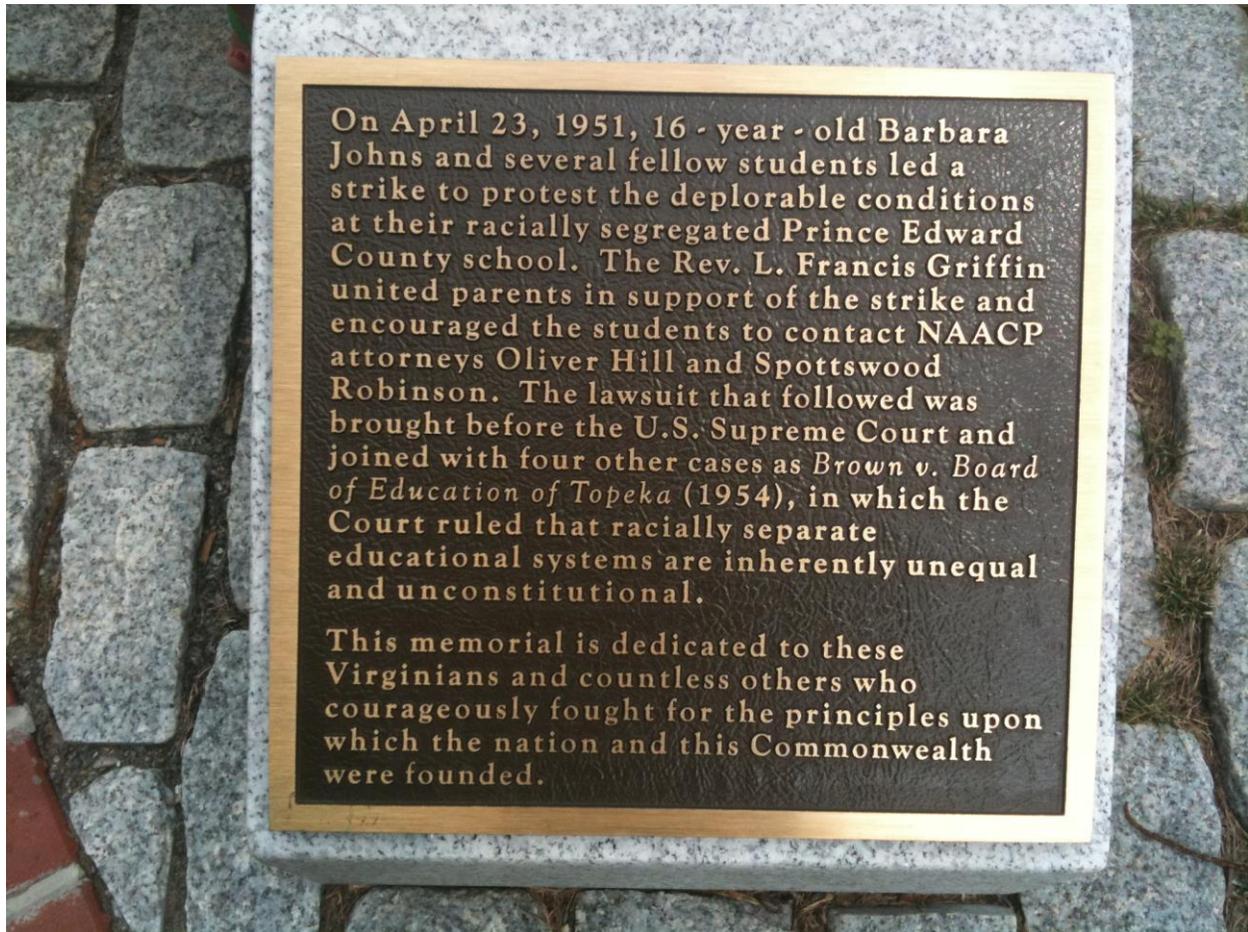
<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/vawomen/honoree.htm?bio=Powell2005>

Some jurisdictions include Barbara Johns in their 4th grade Virginia Studies curriculum Standard 9c: The student will demonstrate knowledge of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Virginia by identifying the social and political events in Virginia linked to desegregation and Massive Resistance and their relationship to national history.

<https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/GRADE-4-Complete.pdf> p. 148

In February 2017, the building that houses the Virginia Attorney General was renamed for Johns. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/virginia-dedicates-state-office-building-in-honor-of-civil-rights-pioneer/2017/02/23/3558aa5c-f9d9-11e6-be05-1a3817ac21a5_story.html?utm_term=.ad26dcf9ab1e

Her name was also under consideration for the former J.E.B. Stuart High School in Fairfax County. http://www.fairfaxtimes.com/articles/fcps-makes-some-initial-progress-in-high-school-renaming-bid/article_c8df3ebe-aacb-11e7-bccb-d798ebf1cbe7.html



Plaque on Virginia Capitol Grounds