

THE COMMISSION
FOR HISTORICAL
STATUES
IN THE UNITED
STATES CAPITOL

CANDIDATE UNDER CONSIDERATION

BARBARA ROSE JOHNS
PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY, VIRGINIA
(1935–1991)

Contribution to Virginia: *Student leader. Organizer of the strike that ignited public school desegregation in the commonwealth and the United States.*

CRITERIA

Suggestions for a historical figure to represent Virginia in the U.S. Capitol, where each state is entitled to two statues, must conform to criteria established by the office of the Architect of the U.S. Capitol. That criteria requires that the person honored—

- be deceased,
- be illustrious for historic renown or for distinguished civic or military service, and
- represent only one individual.

While the criteria also requires that the person must have been a U.S. citizen, it does make exceptions for an indigenous person who resided in the present-day U.S., such as Pocahontas, one name already submitted to the commission.

To those criteria, the commission has added additional values and attributes. The historical person must be—

- associated with significant events that changed the course of history
- or associated with significant ideals, writings or concepts
- or renowned for exemplary valor, patriotism, and bravery.

The person also must be one whose primary historical significance ties her or him directly to Virginia — or who spent the majority of his or her life residing in the commonwealth. And the historical figure should represent current prevailing values, according the commission's criteria.

Biography Contribution by the Robert Russa Moton Museum (unedited)

Barbara Rose Johns was born in New York City in 1935 to Violet and Robert Johns. She moved to Prince Edward County during World War II to live on a farm with her maternal grandmother, Mary Croner. She spent most of her youth living and working on her grandmother's, and later her father's, farm.

After years of frustration with Prince Edward County school which she describes (later in a memoir) as having inadequacies such as poor facilities, shabby equipment and no science laboratories or separate gymnasium, Barbara took her concerns to a teacher who responded by asking, "Why don't you do something about it?" Barbara describes feeling as though her teacher's comments were dismissive, and as a result she was somewhat discouraged. However, after months of contemplation and imagination she began to formulate a plan. As Barbara describes it,

"The plan I felt was divinely inspired because I hadn't been able to think of anything until then. The plan was to assemble together the student council members.... From this, we would formulate plans to go on strike. We would make signs and I would give a speech stating our dissatisfaction and we would march out [of] the school and people would hear us and see us and understand our difficulty and would sympathize with our plight and would grant us our new school building and our teachers would be proud and the students would learn more and it would be grand...."

Seizing the moment, on April 23, 1951, Barbara Johns, a 16 year-old high school girl in Prince Edward County, Virginia, led her classmates in a strike to protest the substandard conditions at Robert Russa Moton High School. Her idealism, planning, and persistence ultimately garnered the support of NAACP lawyers Spottswood Robinson and Oliver Hill to take up her cause and the cause of more equitable conditions for Moton High School. After meeting with the students and the community, lawyers Spottswood Robinson and Oliver Hill filed suit at the federal courthouse in Richmond, Virginia. The case was called *Davis v. Prince Edward County*. In 1954, the Farmville case became one of five cases that the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed in *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* when it declared segregation unconstitutional.



Richmond Times Dispatch

Following the strike, Barbara was sent to live with her Uncle Vernon Johns in Montgomery, Alabama, to finish her schooling. After graduating from high school, she attended Spellman College in Atlanta, Georgia, and ultimately graduated from Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Barbara Johns went on to lead a quiet life; she married Reverend William Powell, raised five children and was a librarian in the Philadelphia Public Schools.

Encyclopedia of Virginia

Biography Contribution by Sharon Wohlmuth

(unedited)

On April 23, 1951, sixteen-year-old Barbara Rose Johns led a student walkout at Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville. The demonstrators were protesting the overcrowded and inferior conditions of the all-black school in comparison to the facilities offered to white students at nearby Farmville High School. Historians consider this strike a pivotal moment in launching the desegregation movement in America.

EXISTING STATUES OF THIS CANDIDATE:

Statue, Capitol Square, Richmond, Virginia