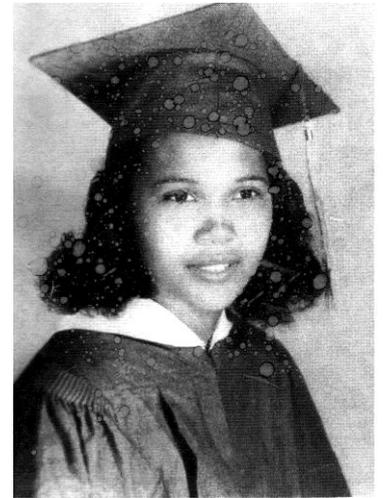


The story of Prince Edward County schools – Biography of Barbara Johns

Barbara Johns was born in New York City in 1935, but grew up in Prince Edward County, Virginia, where blacks and whites had separate schools. In 1951, she led her fellow African-American high school students in a walkout to protest the inequality of segregated schools. She then started a lawsuit that became part of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case that eventually ended school segregation.

At the segregated schools in Prince Edward County, the conditions of the African-American schools were much worse than the whites-only schools. Johns attended the Robert Russa Moton High School, which suffered from overcrowding and poor facilities. The building was meant for only approximately 150 students, but by the 1950s there were more than 400 students enrolled. The county's all-white school board tried to fix this problem by erecting three tar-paper buildings on school grounds, which have been described by some as "chicken shacks."

In 1951, Johns took a stand against the unequal treatment of African-American and white students in the county. The niece of the outspoken minister, [Vernon Johns](#), she bravely stood in front of her fellow students at an assembly and delivered an impassioned speech urging them to join her in a strike against the school system to force them to make changes. Following her lead, the students left the school in protest of overcrowding. This walkout was one of the first of its kind.



Johns then contacted two lawyers, Oliver W. Hill and Spottswood Robinson III, who were with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They agreed to help with a lawsuit aimed at ending racial segregation. The case was called *Dorothy E. Davis et al v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, but it usually referred to as *Davis v. Prince Edward*. A ninth grader named Dorothy E. Davis was the first named plaintiff in the case, but the suit actually represented 117 students in all. The lawyers filed the suit in 1951. The following year, the U.S. District Court sided with the school board. *Davis v. Prince Edward* later became part of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 case in which the United States Supreme Court declared that segregation was unconstitutional. For her part in the integration movement, Johns was harassed and reportedly went to live with relatives in Alabama after a cross was burned in her family's yard.

Despite the Supreme Court ruling, Prince Edward County and the state of Virginia resisted integration. The state passed a series of laws that superseded the court's decision, allowing schools not to be forced to integrate. But in 1959, these rules were struck down in state and federal courts. Still Prince Edward County pressed on with its anti-integration efforts, closing its schools rather than having black and white students use the same facilities.

The schools remained closed for five years, reopening in 1964.

Source: Barbara Johns. (2014). *The Biography Channel website*. Retrieved 11:19, Mar 21, 2014, from <http://www.biography.com/people/barbara-johns-206527>.