

THE MOTON SCHOOL STRIKE OF 1951

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The Moton School Strike of 1951 was one of the steppingstones to the Civil Rights Movement of our country. Barbara Johns, a courageous, young sixteen-year-old girl, was able to lead a strike that would change school systems and life as we know them today. She did not realize what she was doing for the history of the United States at the time, but this protest would lead to many other historical people speaking out against racial issues. Her protest took place in April of 1951 in Prince Edward County, Virginia, and there were many things that caused this event to take place. Two of the largest causes of this strike were the inequality that the African American people felt and the horrific events that these people had to encounter such as the bus accident, receiving threats, tar paper shacks, not having central heating and air, and many more. All these horrible conditions they were taught in made the children not want to attend school in the first place and being treated unfairly did not help the situation move forward. Even though previous decisions had been made to say that the races would be separate but equal, they were very far from equal. and this needed to be fixed as soon as possible. Many effects came from this strike, but the most prevalent ones were the immediate effects on the teachers and students, all the public schools closing for such a long period of time, and the court case that caused them to finally integrate the schools.

When people think of this strike usually the first thing that comes to mind is all the national effects, but it also affected the people living right here in the heart of Farmville. A young girl would start a revolution that would make the schools systems what we know today as fair and equal. As the students protested outside of that very torn down, unequal building they called a school, they only protested for a new school, not a desegregated one.¹ These students walked out on April 23, 1951, and they did not return until they were forced to on May 7, 1951. During this two-week period, it caused a downwards spiral of events to occur. The students, for one, were not in school to be taught so the teachers were out of a job. One

of the worst situations the teachers faced was that the highest paid teacher at Moton High School made less than the lowest paid instructor at the white high school which caused them to be in a bad financial situation.² This led to them not being able to meet their own needs, and at the same time it got others thinking about the separate but equal stance. They all knew that they wanted change, but they would have to fight a bigger battle which was against Prince Edward County and the many people on their side.

One of the worst effects of this strike was that all the public schools in Prince Edward County were closed from 1958 to 1964.³ Even though a previous decision had been made to integrate the schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*, this county was the only one in the country to shut down for such a long period of time due to massive resistance. *Brown v. Board of Education* was a combined case that emerged five cases into one and they came up with a decision that they thought would fix all of the problems at once, but it clearly did not fix them all.⁴ While the schools were closed, many white students that were somewhat well off moved to Fuqua, the private school in Farmville, but that was very limited and not for African Americans. That left the other students with moving to surrounding counties for education, having classes in local churches, or not attending school at all. With these schools being closed for so long it caught national attention and even had President Kennedy talking about it to the public. In the long run this had many negative effects on the two thousand students that were affected. Once the schools finally reopened in 1964 many students did not return to school and just went without a normal education for their entire life, and this was not a very good outcome for the county.

Even though most of the immediate effects of the Moton School Strike of 1951 were negative, a very positive thing came out of it in the end which was integration. It only took one step in the very beginning when Barbara Johns sent a letter to Oliver Hill and Spottswood

Robinson asking for their help in a lawsuit for their unequal treatment.⁵ Oliver knew that all she wanted was a new school and for it to be as equal as possible, but he asked her why not push for a bigger goal instead such as integration. Only one month later did they file the suit, *Davis V. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, in federal court and it was eventually repealed all the way to the United States Supreme Court.⁶ Everyone knew that their dream would not come true soon but with persistence and drive they would eventually be able to push through all the hatred they received and win. Even though the decision had been made to integrate schools back in 1954, Prince Edward County did not listen until decades later. Virginia schools did not fully integrate until the beginning of the 1970's. Barbara had to wait years for what was right, but she eventually received what was wanted by many in the very beginning and that was to be together and equal.

Barbara Johns was just a normal teenager that started something that the entire country was scared to do, bring up separate but not equal. She did so in a strike that would not only make Virginia's top headlines, but national ones and even go all the way to the supreme court ruling of *Brown V. Board of Education*. She wanted everything to change for not only the African American community in Prince Edward county but across the nation. She had to take a stance along with other students for what she believed was right. Herself and all the other students at the time had to face many difficult situations in the beginning, but they eventually won the battle for their future generations to come. Good things come to those who wait, and this was definitely a step in the right direction for the future of the entire country. The Moton School Strike of 1951 led the way for many other Civil Rights leaders and activists to finally step up and take stances for more rights that were necessary for African Americans.

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