CIVIL RIGHTS
WALKING TOUR
FARMVILLE, VIRGINIA

Introduction

Farmville stood at the heart of the struggle over the meaning of freedom and equality in twentieth-century America. Young people played a defining role in this movement. In 1951, over 450 students, led by 16-year- old Barbara Johns, staged a walkout at the Robert R. Moton High School to protest the inadequate and overcrowded facilities African-Americans faced. Their action launched a 13-year legal fight that expanded equality for all Americans.

The Moton student strike resulted in the *Davis v. Prince Edward* case that the Supreme Court bundled together with four others in its landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which declared segregation in public education unconstitutional.

However, the struggle for educational equality in Prince Edward did not end there. In 1959 county officials, under a court order to desegregate, instead chose to defund the public schools, effectively closing them. While white students were educated at a newly created private academy, school-age African-Americans who remained in the county were locked out. The public schools remained closed for five years as the legal battle to reopen them stalled in the courts.

By July 1963, local young people were frustrated by the slow pace of change and were inspired by the broader civil rights movement then sweeping the South. They wanted to do more than just wait for the courts. Advised by the Rev. L. Francis Griffin of First Baptist Church, they planned direct action protests and encouraged citizens to boycott discriminatory merchants. The protests resulted in the hiring of the first African-American employee downtown and helped lead to the opening of the Prince Edward Free Schools, with assistance from the U.S. Department of Justice, in September 1963. In 1964, the Supreme Court decision *Griffin v. Prince Edward* ordered the reopening of public schools.

This walking tour guides you to sites in downtown Farmville significant to this history between 1951 and 1964. The two-mile route is designed to begin and end at the Moton Museum and takes you along Main Street, High Street, and Griffin Boulevard, but you can begin and end the tour at any point. Downtown Farmville has changed dramatically since the 1960s. We encourage you to explore its shops and cultural attractions as you engage with its fascinating past.

Sites on the tour are identified by a Civil Rights Walking Tour logo on the sidewalk. If you have a smartphone, you can also follow the Tour online at http://CivilRightsTour.MotonMuseum.org. There you can see more about the sites and listen to people involved in this history.

ROBERT RUSSA MOTON MUSEUM

LONGWOOD UNIVERSITY

This program was supported by a grant from Virginia Humanities (VH).

Virginia Humanities

The mission of Virginia Humanities is to connect people and ideas to explore the human experience and inspire cultural engagement. VH reaches audiences across the Commonwealth and beyond through Community Programs, Digital Initiatives, Scholarship, and the Virginia Center for the Book. For more information, visit VirginiaHumanities.org.

Additional photo credits available on the Civil Rights Walking Tour website.

FARMVILLE
DOWNTOWN
PARTNERSHIP

This brochure and website is a joint collaboration between the Farmville Downtown Partnership, the Moton Museum, and Longwood University.

CivilRightsTour.MotonMuseum.org

Timeline

1939 Moton High School built to hold 180 students.

1951 Moton students strike to protest conditions; *Davis v. County School Board* filed.

1954 *Davis* case decided as part of Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared segregated education unconstitutional.

1955 Supreme Court rules in *Brown II* that school desegregation should occur "with all deliberate speed."

1959 Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors closed public schools rather than desegregate them. Prince Edward Academy opened.

1961 NAACP rally at Prince Edward County Courthouse.

1963 Student-led demonstrations in downtown Farmville.

1963-64 Prince Edward Free Schools open to provide free education to all children in the county.

1964 County schools reopened after Supreme Court ruling in *Griffin v. County School Board*.

Robert Russa Moton Museum

Photo: Library of Congress

900 Griffin Blvd
(intersection of Griffin Blvd and Main St.)

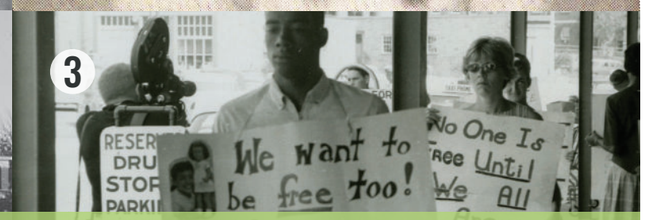
Constructed in 1939, the Robert Russa Moton High School was built for 180 students. By the 1940s, the student population reached over 450. The Moton Parent Teachers Association lobbied the county to build a new school, but instead the county constructed three temporary buildings to be used as classrooms. They became known as the "tar paper shacks." The deplorable conditions, combined with the overcrowding, prompted Barbara Johns to recruit her classmates to help her plan the student strike on April 23, 1951.

Mary E. Branch School

Photo: Library of Virginia

S. Main St. across from the Longwood University Athletic Fields

Originally called the Farmville Colored School (also Farmville No. 2 or Farmville Training School), this building was constructed in 1926 to serve as an elementary school. Grades 8 through 11 were added gradually, and in 1931, the school was renamed Robert Russa Moton High School. In 1939, when the new high school across Main Street opened and adopted that name, this school was renamed for Mary E. Branch, a native of Farmville who became president of Tillotson College in Texas.



Dr. N. P. Miller's Office/ Farmville Shopping Center

Photo: VCU Libraries

100 Madison St.

Dr. Nathaniel P. Miller, a prominent African-American dentist, was active in many civic organizations, including the NAACP. While the public schools were closed, Dr. Miller allowed the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker civil rights organization, to use his building as its headquarters when they came to help ameliorate race relations.

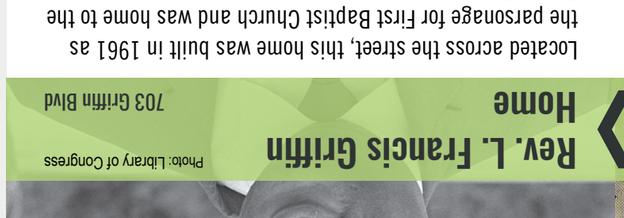
Across the street, Farmville's first shopping center was picketed by the Prince Edward NAACP Youth Council in July 1963. Young African-Americans were frustrated with the pace of the legal process to open the schools and the lack of employment opportunities downtown. The protests marked a shift from the courtroom to the streets to challenge segregation.

First Baptist Church

Photo: VCU Libraries

100 S. Main St.

First Baptist Church, led from 1949 to 1980 by the Rev. L. Francis Griffin, was the spiritual and tactical center of the civil rights movement here. On April 25, 1951, two days after the Moton student strike, Barbara Johns and fellow organizers met with NAACP attorneys Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson at First Baptist. The students convinced the attorneys to take their case on the condition that the case would challenge the constitutionality of segregation in public education. On May 3, 1951, the community packed First Baptist Church where they enthusiastically supported the students in their case. In 1963, Rev. Griffin and First Baptist Church again supported young people in organizing the boycott of downtown stores and protests that summer.



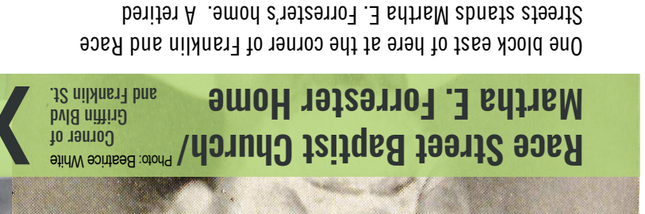
Beulah AME Church & Parsonage

Photo: VCU Libraries

115 S. Main St.

Founded in 1868, Beulah African Methodist Episcopal Church served as a center for civil rights organizing while the public schools were closed. In 1959, the Rev. A. I. Dunlap made it possible for African-American students who were seniors at Moton to attend Kittrell College in Henderson, N.C., to complete their education.

The Rev. Goodwin Douglas, a native of Bermuda who roomed with a Prince Edward County student at Kittrell, accepted a position at Beulah. He and the Rev. J. Samuel Williams, Jr., helped organize the student protests of downtown businesses in the summer of 1963. Both ministers had experience in civil rights demonstrations elsewhere.



State Theater

Photo: VCU Libraries

Corner of S. Main St. and 4th St.

On Sept. 10, 1959, the Prince Edward County School Foundation began the inaugural year of Prince Edward Academy with a ceremony in the theater formerly located here. Almost 1,500 white children had enrolled in the private school established by white community leaders following the county's June 1959 decision to close the public schools rather than integrate them. The whites-only State Theater was also a target for protests in 1963. The picketers were primarily young, local African-Americans inspired by civil rights activities elsewhere. Many of their parents were unable to join them due to the economic pressure segregationists could exert on their jobs and on their credit in stores.

Rev. L. Francis Griffin Home

Photo: Library of Congress

703 Griffin Blvd

Located across the street, this home was built in 1961 as the parsonage for First Baptist Church and was home to the Rev. L. Francis Griffin and his family. Known to many as "The Fighting Preacher," Griffin was the preeminent civil rights leader in Prince Edward County and a trusted adviser to generations of young people. Griffin's first parsonage was located at the corner of Chambers and Ely Streets (now Griffin Blvd). In 1958, Longwood College purchased the property for the expansion of campus, and the Griffins had to relocate to this home.

Race Street Baptist Church/ Martha E. Forrester Home

Photo: Beatrice White

Corner of Griffin Blvd and Franklin St.

One block east of here at the corner of Franklin and Race Streets stands Martha E. Forrester's home. A retired teacher, Forrester was one of six African-American women who founded the Council of Colored Women in 1920. It advocated for improved schools and was instrumental in improving the Farmville Training School as well as the construction of Moton High School, opened in 1939.

One block west of here at the corner of Franklin and Hill Streets stands Jericho Baptist Church, formerly called Race Street Baptist Church, founded in 1894. During the 1960s, the congregation supported the Rev. Griffin's civil rights activities. In 1967, the church was forced to relocate from its original location on the east side of Race Street to Hill Street when Longwood College used eminent domain to expand its campus.

College Shoppe

Photo: VCU Libraries

118 S. Main St.

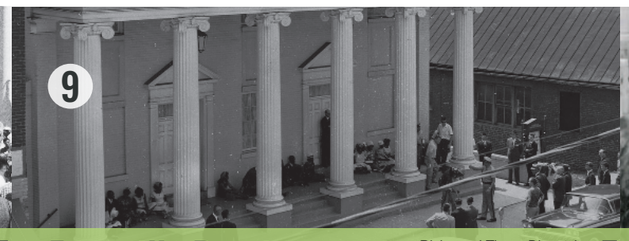
In addition to drawing attention to the absence of public education, African-American students protested segregated businesses in downtown Farmville in 1963. On July 27, demonstrators were barred from entering the College Shoppe restaurant, formerly located to the south of this building, and refused to leave the sidewalk outside. As police approached, the protesters went limp before being arrested. In contrast to the violent response to civil rights protests in the Deep South, local governmental officials here tried to halt demonstrations through bureaucratic means, refusing to issue parade permits and closing the streets.

Prince Edward County Courthouse

Photo: Richmond Times-Dispatch

124 N. Main St.

Prince Edward County Courthouse was the site of a May 20, 1961, rally organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to recognize the seventh anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* and to protest the continued closure of the public schools. With over 1,000 people in attendance, Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the national NAACP, and Oliver Hill, former head of the legal staff of the Virginia State Conference NAACP and newly appointed assistant to the federal housing secretary, criticized local officials and state politicians for denying black children public education.



Farmville Baptist Church

Photo: Richmond Times-Dispatch

132 N. Main St.

Founded in 1836, Farmville Baptist was one of the four churches that young African-American protestors attempted to integrate on Sunday, July 28, 1963, as part of a peaceful "kneel-in." After being denied entrance to Farmville Baptist, the group of six adults and 17 students prayed and sung hymns on the church steps before being arrested for "disturbing the public worship of God." The demonstrators were arrested and taken to the county courthouse. The minors were released to their parents; the six adults refused bond and remained in custody. The growing number of protests surprised local law enforcement officials and local citizens and nearby jails were deputized to respond.

J. J. Newberry Co. Department Store

Photo: VCU Libraries

129 N. Main St.

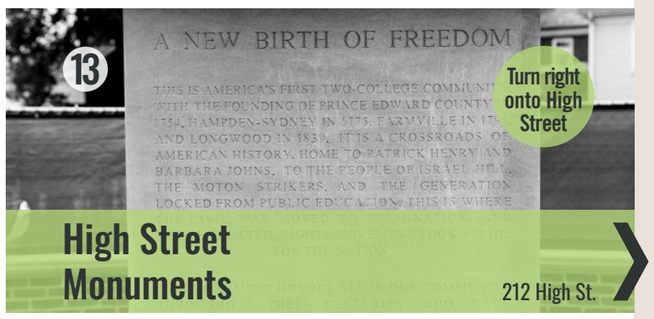
On Friday, July 26, 1963, twelve young African-Americans from Prince Edward County staged a sit-in at the lunch counter in the J. J. Newberry Co. department store formerly located here. After the demonstrators left, employees removed the stools, preventing further sit-ins from taking place. Other protesters handed out leaflets calling on African-Americans in surrounding counties to use their spending power as economic leverage and to boycott segregated businesses. They hoped to pressure businessmen into hiring African-American employees and to exert pressure on local officials to open the closed public schools.

Farmville Presbyterian Church

Photo: Charlaine Coetzee

200 W. Third St.

White residents of Prince Edward County were not unanimous in their response to closing the public schools, and differing opinions threatened to undermine established institutions, including Farmville Presbyterian Church, founded in 1844. Its pastor, the Rev. James R. Kennedy, spoke out against segregation and closing the public schools at a June 7, 1955, public meeting to discuss the preliminaries for a private whites-only school. However, some members of the congregation opposed the South Carolina native's response. Caught between his personal convictions and the will of his congregation, Kennedy elected to resign his post in June 1956 rather than divide the church. The basement of the church and others nearby served as classrooms for the white Prince Edward Academy when it opened in September 1959.



High Street Monuments

212 High St.

The monument northeast of the intersection of Randolph and High Streets was dedicated in 1900, during the height of the "Lost Cause" period of white nostalgia for the Confederacy. Its inscription, "Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties," provided the name to the eighteen-county organization supporting school segregation. They alleged the *Brown vs. Board* decisions were part of a historical conflict between national and local authority.

The monument southwest of the intersection was dedicated in 2018 to honor persons in the community who aspired to expand freedom and civil rights throughout American history. Named in the inscription are colonial orator Patrick Henry, members of the antebellum free black community of Israel Hill, Barbara Johns and her fellow 1951 Moton school strikers, and the Black students locked out of public schools from 1959 to 1964.

Jarman Auditorium at Longwood University

Photo: Longwood Archives

407 High St.

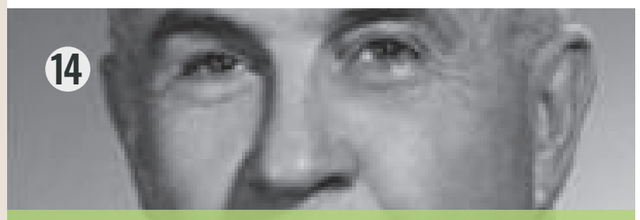
Constructed in 1951, Longwood University's auditorium was the site of a June 7, 1955, community meeting. About 1,250 Prince Edward County residents, the vast majority of whom were white, met to discuss what to do in response to the Supreme Court's ruling the previous month known as *Brown II*, which declared that school desegregation should occur "with all deliberate speed." The meeting resulted in the establishment of a foundation to fund a private segregated academy in the event that the courts ordered Prince Edward to desegregate, which occurred in 1959.

Farmville *Herald* Office

Photo: Richmond Times-Dispatch

114 North St.

The Farmville *Herald*, published bi-weekly, was founded in 1890. J. Barrye Wall purchased the *Herald* in 1921 and served as editor during the period of the school closings. Under Wall's leadership, the Farmville *Herald* was a strident opponent of the *Brown* decision and championed local efforts to thwart desegregation and establish a county-wide system of private schools. Wall encouraged local citizens to "stand steady" against what he perceived as an overreaching federal government and the invasion of activist outsiders who disrupted the "harmonious" race relations in Farmville.



Johns Memorial Episcopal Church/Gordon Moss Home

Photo: Longwood Archives

400 High St.

When small groups of African-American students attempted to attend services at four downtown Farmville churches to integrate the traditionally white houses of worship on Sunday, July 28, 1963, Johns Memorial, built in 1882, was the only one into which they were admitted. Gordon Moss, the chief academic officer at Longwood College, invited the protesters to sit in his pew. One of only a few prominent, outspoken white voices against the closing of public schools, Moss's opposition incurred social and professional costs to his family and himself, including his leadership role at Johns Memorial. Moss's home was located a block northeast at the current site of Bicentennial Park.

Map Legend

View online at: CivilRightsTour.MotonMuseum.org

Tour Location

Location Label

Street

tour locations continued on back