

The Civil Rights Movement in Virginia

After World War II, African Americans began to demand equal treatment and their rights as American citizens. This struggle was called the Civil Rights Movement and it would change Virginia and our nation forever.

Although slavery had been abolished almost 100 years before, African Americans did not enjoy the same rights and freedoms as white Americans. They were forced to sit in the back of city buses, drink from different water fountains, use different restroom facilities, and attend different schools. Barbara Johns, a 16-year-old high school junior in Farmville, Virginia, led a student strike against segregation in 1951. The case that resulted, *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward*, became one of the five cases reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court when it declared segregation unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. As a result, all public schools, including those in Virginia, were ordered to integrate. Integration is the full equality of all races in the use of public facilities. Oliver W. Hill, a lawyer and civil rights leader, worked for equal rights of African Americans. He played a key role in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

A number of Virginia's leaders did not agree with the new laws that ordered an end to segregation. As a result, Virginia's government established a policy of Massive Resistance. This policy "resisted" desegregation (abolishment of racial segregation). Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr. had a new law passed that forced the governor of Virginia to close any school that followed the Supreme Court order. Between 1958 and 1959 many public schools were closed to avoid integration.

By 1959, however, the Virginia Supreme Court had outlawed school closings and the policy of Massive Resistance had failed. Within a month of the court's ruling, Virginia's public schools were integrated.