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History in the Making

Barbara Johns: A Lasting Legacy in National Statuary

By Hannah Knight

On December 21, 2020, construction workers removed a statue honoring one of the most iconic figures of the history of the Confederacy, Robert E. Lee (1807–1870), from the United States Capitol. The removal of the statue follows the most recent trend surrounding the discussion of who is to be honored in the United States. The removal of Lee’s statue is a sign of a significant shift in the current culture as the United States moves to recognize previously unmentioned figures of the early Civil Rights era. The participants of the Civil Rights Movement came from various backgrounds, yet one of the key groups that enacted a significant amount of social change was students. As emphasized by social activist James Baldwin (1924–1987), “[t]he great significance of the present student generation is that it is through them that the point of view or the subjugated is finally and inexorably being expressed.”¹ Though James Baldwin was referring to college-age individuals, he was correct that students were part of the driving force of the Civil Rights Movement, and significantly, it was a

¹ Baldwin, James, “They Can’t Turn Back,” Historyisaweapon.com, 1960. Accessed May 15, 2021.

<https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/baldwincantturnback.html#:~:text=On%20February%201%2C%201960%2C%20four%20students%20from%20North%20Carolina%20A.&text=In%201960%2C%20the%20writer%20James,idealism%20of%20the%20younger%20generation.>

student from the 1950s that was chosen to replace Robert E. Lee's statue.

On April 23, 1951, sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns (1935–1991) led a student body of over four hundred students in a walkout to protest the inequalities that existed within the school system of Prince Edward County, Virginia. Despite the walkout contributing to the monumental case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 US 483 (1954), Barbara Johns remained unmentioned in the pages of history textbooks. Many still lack an understanding of the events surrounding that day which is why she is still relatively unknown outside of academic literature. While several explanations are offered to explain the lack of substantial acknowledgment in academic literature, the examination of the current social norms presents the clearest explanation. Both her race, gender, and patterns of racism and sexism undoubtedly contributed to her obscurity. The recent decision to replace the statue of General Robert E. Lee with Barbara Johns reintroduces her tale to the United States.

Almost sixty years before the walkout, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 US 537 (1896) established the standard of segregation and the concept of “separate but equal.”² However, the conditions of these public places for African Americans, such as schools, that existed within the Jim Crow South were far from equal. Like many schools in Farmville, Virginia, Barbara Johns' high school, Robert Russa Moton High School, bore the signs of inequality. L. Francis Griffin Sr. (1917–1980), a Civil Rights leader, stated that the school buildings for African American students were of poor construction due to the use of inferior building materials, sometimes gaining the nickname “tar paper buildings.”³ John Stokes (b.1931), one of the student leaders who worked with Barbara Johns during the

² “*Plessy v. Ferguson* 1896,” ourdocuments.gov, accessed March 25, 2021. <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=52>.

³ L. Francis Griffin Sr., “Historic Walkout of Virginia Students Recalled,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 29, 1979, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=nIIIAAAIAIBAJ&sjid=V_UFAAAAIBAJ&pg=980%2C3198886.

walkout, later recalled the conditions of his high school: “The buildings, the shacks themselves, well to tell you frankly I used to catch colds in them. They were drafty and they were cold. If you sat around the stove you were too warm and if you sat away from it you were too cold.”⁴ In sharp contrast, white schools had indoor facilities, heating systems, and were properly supplied, among many other privileges. Despite the parents who attempted to address these concerns with the school board, problems such as overcrowding, lack of equipment, and poor facilities continued to exist.⁵

Before April 23, 1951, Barbara Johns would not have stood out from any of her classmates. A diligent student, she cared for her younger siblings daily as her mom worked as a clerk and her father worked in the family’s tobacco field.⁶ Two pinnacle events disrupted her normal routine and set her on the path to lead a massive student walkout. One involved a conversation with her teacher, Miss Davenport. After Miss Davenport listened to her complaints regarding the disparities between the colored and white schools, Barbara Johns later recounted, “[s]he paused for a few moments and said, ‘Why don’t you do something about it?’”⁷ The second pivotal moment came later when, after missing her bus one day, she witnessed a white-only school bus go by her only partially filled.⁸ With this experience and the words of her teacher as her

⁴ Bob Smith, “They Closed Their Schools: Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1951–1964,” in *A Little Child Shall Lead Them: A Documentary Account of the Struggle for School Desegregation in Prince Edward County, Virginia*, ed. Brian J. Daugherty and Brian Grogan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019): 40.

⁵ “Barbara Johns leads Prince Edward County student walkout,” Digital SNCC Gateway, July 14, 2020, <https://snccdigital.org/events/barbara-johns-leads-prince-edward-county-student-walkout/>.

⁶ Barbara Johns, “Recollections,” in *A Little Child Shall Lead Them: A Documentary Account of the Struggle for School Desegregation in Prince Edward County, Virginia*, ed. Brian J. Daugherty and Brian Grogan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 43–44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

motivation, Barbara Johns began to approach a few students to take action against these inequalities.

Working with John Stokes, his sister, Carrie, and a couple of other student leaders, Barbara Johns walked into Robert Russa Moton High School's auditorium on April 23, 1951, and convinced the entire student body to walk out of the school for the next couple of weeks. Barbara Johns and her classmates risked several consequences through their persistence. Barbara Johns herself risked the possibility of expulsion and threats that ultimately resulted in her move to another high school during her last year. In retaliation for her participation in the walkout, stores in her family's community no longer gave credit to her family, causing a financial burden on them.⁹ Despite the consequences, the persistence of Barbara Johns and her classmates eventually caught the attention of the state and Civil Rights leaders.

The strike to protest for improved school conditions quickly transitioned into a fight to desegregate public education. The court case *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, 347 US 483 (1951), named for the first student listed in the case, was not the first, nor would it be the last, in the fight to end segregation in the public school system. However, *Dorothy E. Davis v. County* was entirely student-driven. As momentous as this case was, and despite the support of well-known Civil Rights lawyers such as Spottswood Robinson III (1916–1998) and Oliver Hill (1907–2007), the court ruled against the students. The United States District Court stated that though the county needed to address the inequalities that existed in the school, they condoned the legality of Section 140 of Virginia's Constitution that mandated the segregation of schools. Furthermore, the court stated that the federal courts had yet to outlaw segregation throughout the country, and they were to follow

⁹ "Brown v. Board at 65: Joan Johns Cobbs Remembers the Day Her Sister Led a Student Protest That Went on to Change the Course of American History," The74million.org, May 14, 2019, <https://www.the74million.org/article/brown-v-board-at-65-joan-johns-cobbs-remembers-the-day-her-sister-led-a-student-protest-that-went-on-to-change-the-course-of-american-history/>.

the federal government's example.¹⁰ Initially defeated, *Dorothy E. Davis v. County* became one of the cases combined to make the momentous court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. In the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren (1891–1974) of the Supreme Court stated, “[w]e conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place.”¹¹ Three years after Barbara Johns led her fellow students in a walkout, the federal government outlawed segregation in schools.

Barbara Johns and the walkout of Robert Russa Moton High School launched a series of pinnacle moments of the Civil Rights Movement, from *Brown v. Board of Education* to Rosa Parks’ (1913–2005) bus ride, the Freedom Rides, the Greensboro sit-ins, and countless others. Nevertheless, only *Brown v. Board of Education* is mentioned in the numerous history textbooks students read about the Civil Rights Movement; little is remembered of the sixteen-year-old girl who led a school walkout.

The broader context of women’s history helps to explain why Johns was omitted from public memory. In the decade before the walkout, World War II opened the doors of opportunity for many women in the United States. Working women increased from clerical to industrial fields, and consequently, their wages increased.¹² As World War II ended, so too did the job opportunities for women. The decade of the 1950s instilled new social expectations for women, one being the expectation of returning to the home. Working women were again confined to jobs deemed socially acceptable, such as secretaries and salesclerks. In her own account of her participation during the

¹⁰ Armistead M. Dobie, Sterling Hutcheson, and Albert V. Bryan, “The Prince Edward County, Virginia Case Decision,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 21, no. 4 (1952): 528–529.

¹¹ Chief Justice Earl Warren, “Opinion of the Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*,” *Schools: Studies in Education* 4, no. 2 (2007): 23.

¹² Mary M. Schweitzer, “World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates,” *The Journal of Economic History* 40, no. 1 (1980): 90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2120427>.

Civil Rights Movement, Rosa Parks spoke of her time as secretary of the Montgomery branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She recalled, “I remember I would be working hard trying to get articles out for Mr. Nixon, sending letters, and going to meetings, and he would just laugh. He used to say. ‘Women don’t need to be nowhere but in the kitchen.’”¹³

After World War II, popular belief expected women to return to their homes, where their responsibilities and influence would not extend beyond their doorways. Girls, learning from the example set by their mothers, learned their place in a patriarchal, racially segregated society. African American women faced more harsh criticism than most because of their intersectionality of race and gender identity. Constantly being upheld to the “ideal womanhood” that was based on white women, African American women were criticized when they took job positions, specifically leadership roles, even if they were supporting their families.¹⁴ When Barbara Johns led a student walkout in a time when female political leaders were often overlooked she challenged the institution of the Jim Crow era’s social norms for African American women.

In 1958, women only accounted for thirty-eight percent of college attendees nationwide.¹⁵ Women in the political field did not fare any better, especially women of color. Shirley Anita Chisholm (1924–2005), the first African American congresswoman, was not elected until 1968 (well after the first

¹³ Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, *My Story* (New York: Penguin Putnam Books, 1992), 82.

¹⁴ Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011), 51–53.

¹⁵ “Postwar Gender Roles and Women in American Politics,” History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Historian, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/Changing-Guard/Identity/>.

white woman).¹⁶ The Civil Rights Movement became a political, social, and cultural battlefield. Even though women were very much a part of the struggle, the societal expectations at the time only allowed a few to gain notoriety. Barbara Johns' participation in the *Dorothy E. Davis v. County* court case contributed to the eventual end of school segregation. However, in many ways, her gender prevented any real form of public recognition compared to male Civil Rights activists.

The case surrounding the Robert Russa Moton High School strike would not bear Barbara Johns as the lead plaintiff. The walkout at Robert Russa Moton High was organized and led by teenagers, with sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns at the lead, yet in the eyes of the law, Barbara Johns and her classmates lacked real legal power because of their race, age, and for the female participants, their gender. In the complaint filed against the Prince Edward County School Board on May 23, 1951, Barbara Johns and her classmates were classified as “infants.”¹⁷ Lacking the ability to file on their own, the focus of the case then shifted to the adults in the room, in essence, away from Barbara Johns' role in the case. Though the teenage culture was on the rise in the United States, the phrase “children should be seen and not heard” was still very present in the culture of the age.¹⁸ The discrimination of Jim Crow laws, gender roles, and age forced Barbara Johns' role to take a backseat in the discussion surrounding the desegregation of schools for nearly seventy years. In the words of historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob in *Telling the Truth About History*, “Historical research on women's lives revealed

¹⁶ “Postwar Gender Roles and Women in American Politics.”

¹⁷ “Complaint Against the Prince Edward County School Board of Virginia,” National Archives Catalog, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/279098>.

¹⁸ Joanne McCarthy, “The old saying that children should be seen but not heard was a dangerous one for children,” *Newcastle Herald*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/5478088/wilson-case-proves-how-far-weve-come/>. The phrase first used by John Mirk, an English priest in the fifteenth century.

differences which threw into sharp relief just how gender-specific was the male ideal that had dominated Western letters since the Greeks.”¹⁹ After nearly seventy years, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob reveal the greatest contributing factor to Johns’ reappearance in academic literature.

Occurring within the last couple of decades, revisionist histories have forced a reevaluation of the national historical narratives. Rather than a complete rewriting of the narrative, revisionists have worked to create a more inclusive history. In addition to these efforts, the real significant shift concerning Barbara Johns took place on December 21, 2020. The removal of the statue that honored General Robert E. Lee from the United States Capitol will be replaced by a statue of Barbara Johns, as decided by Virginia state officials.²⁰ Virginia’s Governor, Ralph Northam, stated that the decision was “an ‘important step forward for our commonwealth and our country.’”²¹ The recent Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements only serve as a reminder of the lack of public recognition for women of color. Part of the recent decisions to remove monuments honoring Confederate members shows a major cultural and social shift in the wake of these movements.

For a nation that is often personified by the female form, such as Miss Columbia, Lady Liberty, and Lady of Justice, when it comes to the representation of women, especially women of color in public memorials, there is much to be desired. Over five thousand statues exist within the United States that honor figures from history, yet women only account for approximately ten

¹⁹ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 153.

²⁰ Isis Davis-Marks, “Statue of Civil Rights Activist Barbara Rose Johns Will Replace U.S. Capitol’s Likeness of Robert E. Lee,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 23, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/workers-remove-robert-e-lee-statue-us-capitol-building-180976612/>.

²¹ Bryan Pietsch, “Robert E. Lee Statue is Removed From U.S. Capitol,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/21/us/robert-e-lee-statue-us-capitol.html>.

percent of its subjects. When it comes to monuments and national parks, that number is significantly lower.²² Barbara Johns' statue is only one of the many attempts to highlight the real women of history and correct the male-dominated narrative that exists in the country. In 2019, the Monumental Women's Campaign worked to include statues honoring Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), and Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) in Central Park, New York. Finally succeeding on August 26, 2020, the only representation of women in the iconic park up until 2020 were statues of fictional characters like Alice in Wonderland and Mother Goose.²³

This pivotal cultural and social shift in the United States, represented by the statue of Barbara Johns, has not been without its challenges. The removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee in the United States Capitol is not the first time the public recognition of Lee has been called into question. In Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, the local city council decided to take out a statue of the former Confederate general in addition to a statue honoring fellow Confederate, Stonewall Jackson (1824–1863), located near the courthouse district. This decision was fought by local citizens, who filed a lawsuit and held a rally that ultimately led to the death of a counter-protester of the rally, Heather Heyer (1985–2017). Only in 2021 was the matter legally settled when the Virginia State Supreme Court ruled in favor of the city council's decision to remove the statues.²⁴

²² Shachar Peled, "Where are the women? New Efforts to give them just due on monuments, street names," CNN, March 8, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/08/us/womens-monument-project-trnd/index.html>.

²³ Robbyn McFadden, "Monumental women: Breaking the bronze ceiling," CBSNews, May 26, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/monumental-women-breaking-the-bronze-ceiling/>.

²⁴ Allyson Waller, "Charlottesville Can Remove Confederate Statues, High Court Rules," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/01/us/charlottesville-confederate-statues.html> 01.

The reexamination of monuments within the United States is in part a desire to recognize previously unknown individuals but it is also connected to the “cancel culture” that has arisen from the Me Too and the Black Lives Matter movements. By definition, canceling someone “means to stop giving support to that person.”²⁵ Celebrities and other well-known figures currently face the possibility of being “canceled” (or boycotted) due to behavior no longer seen as acceptable, whether it be inappropriate remarks towards a person or group of people, discriminatory actions or comments, exploitation, or sexual assault and abuse. In the same sense, many historical figures are being re-examined for their actions as new information is discovered. It is through this reexamination that public memorials, dedicated to figures like Robert E. Lee, are being reconsidered. Lee is not the only figure whose monument has been removed or is being considered for removal. Representations of figures such as Stonewall Jackson, Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), and even Andrew Jackson’s (1767–1845) image on the twenty-dollar bill, have been reevaluated in light of their treatment towards minority groups and pro-slavery views. Current reevaluation and historical revisionism have opened opportunities for more unknown figures to be publicly recognized, as in the case of Barbara Johns. However, these debates have left historians divided. Figures such as Robert E. Lee undoubtedly shaped the course of history, yet now, the question before historians and educators is how to address their roles in history.

The effects of the current age of revisionist history and reevaluation of the country’s monuments have rippled throughout academic literature. Historians have rediscovered important individuals who contributed to life-altering events, such as the Civil Rights Movement, and still, many more are waiting to be recognized. In light of the recent Me Too and Black Lives Matter

²⁵ “What It Means to Get ‘Canceled,’” Merriam-Webster.com, January 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/cancel-culture-words-were-watching>.

movements, Barbara Johns' statue has done more than reintroduce her struggles to end school desegregation and racial inequality. Her statue represents a major cultural shift toward inclusivity in the United States narrative as the nation works to draw attention to more women, particularly women of color, in United States history.

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Author Bio

Hannah Knight graduated from California State University, San Bernardino with a Bachelor of Arts in History in 2014 and earned her teaching credential in March 2016. For the past five years she has taught high school history, specifically United States history and AP world history. She is currently enrolled in CSUSB's Master of Arts in History program, with an interest in women's history. Though she has always been interested in history, it was her eighth grade US history teacher, Mr. Lopez, and her ninth-grade world history teacher, Mr. Fakkema, who piqued her interest in the subject. Having the opportunity to visit Italy, Hannah hopes to continue traveling in the future to see the places that have played a significant role in history. She would like to thank all the editors of the journal, especially Brittany Mondragon, for all their hard work and Dr. Marc Robinson for first introducing her to Barbara Rose Johns. She would also like to thank her family and friends for their continuous support and her sister for always being her main editor.

