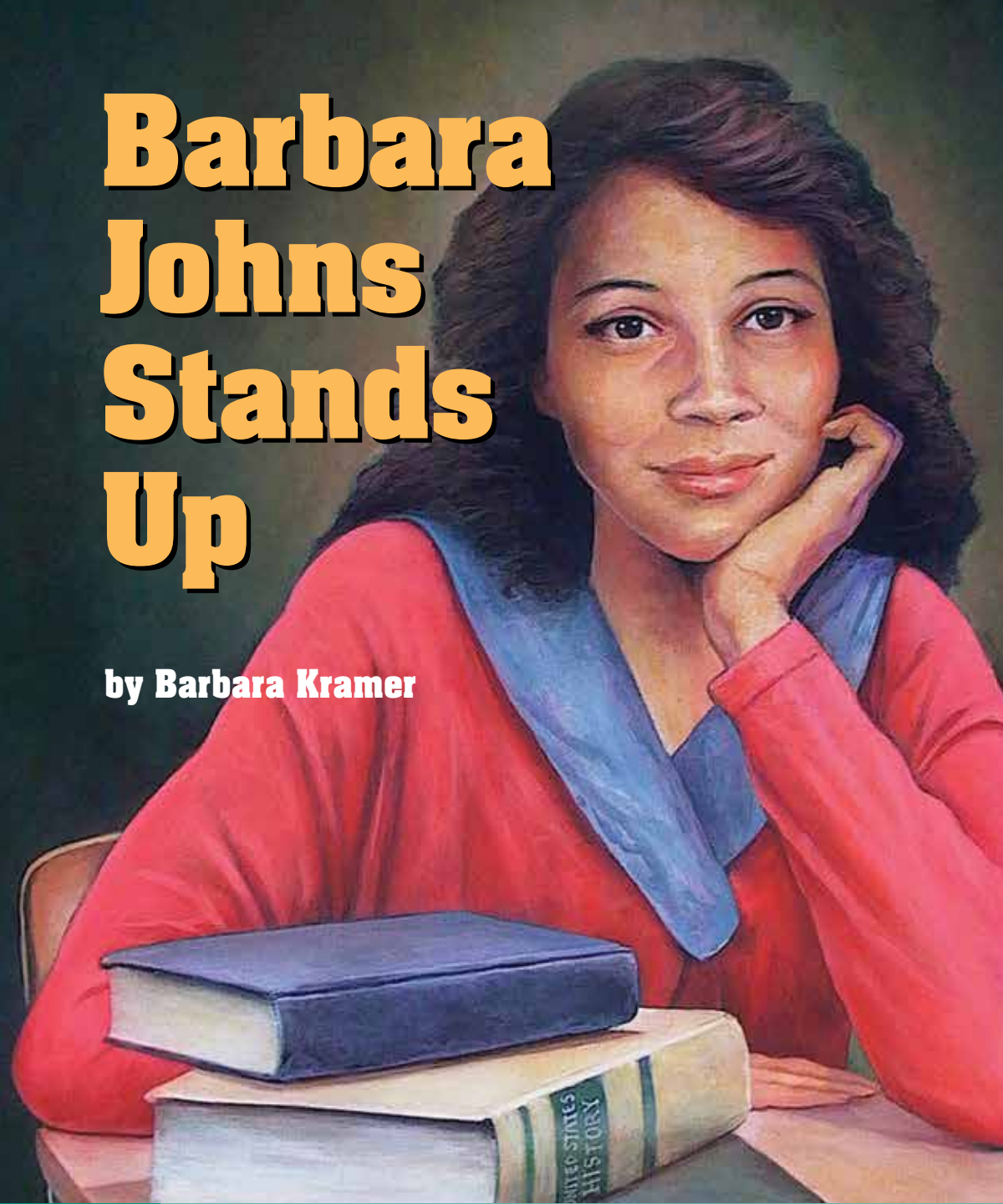


# Barbara Johns Stands Up

by Barbara Kramer



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On April 23, 1951, the students at Moton High School crowded into the school auditorium. When they were settled, sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns took the stage. She was usually a quiet girl, but that day she spoke fearlessly, calling for students to join her in an organized **protest** against the poor conditions in their school. This action, she told her classmates, could lead to some long overdue changes.

At that time, schools were **segregated**, the result of laws forbidding African Americans from eating in the same restaurants, drinking from the same water fountains, or attending the same schools as white people. Even worse, the schools attended by the African American students received little funding and were badly neglected.

## Amplify Atlas™

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## Barbara Johns Stands Up Level Z

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Farmville is located in central Virginia, about 130 miles southwest of Washington D.C.

Barbara's high school, in Farmville, Virginia, had no gymnasium, cafeteria, or lockers. When it was built in 1939, it was meant to serve about 180 students. By 1951, however, the student body had grown to 400. The all-white school board's answer to the overcrowded conditions was to build three flimsy wooden shacks to serve as classrooms. The hastily constructed buildings did little to keep out the rain or frigid winds.

When Barbara thought about the large, well-equipped high school attended by white students nearby, the unfairness upset her. She complained to her music teacher, Miss Davenport, who asked, simply, "Then why don't you do something about it?"

But what could one sixteen-year-old girl do, Barbara wondered. Over the next few weeks, she pondered that question as she did her chores or sat quietly in her favorite spot in the woods. Finally, she came up with an idea.

Barbara first shared her plan with only four trusted friends, who agreed to help her. On the morning of April 23, 1951, they waited until the principal was out of the building on a school-related errand. They then invited students to the auditorium, asking permission from their teachers for this to be a students-only meeting. Then Barbara spoke, urging the students to stage a **strike**. She wanted them to walk out of the school and not come back until the school board agreed to construct a new building.

When she left the auditorium, all 400 students marched out behind her. When their parents heard what had happened, and why, almost all of them supported the students' actions.



On April 23, 1951, Barbara Johns spoke to students in this auditorium at Moton High School.



The Virginia Civil Rights Memorial honors Barbara Johns and the students at Moton High School.

The strike lasted two weeks. During that time, other individuals got involved. Barbara's goal had been a new school, but African American leaders wanted to use what Barbara had started as a step toward ending segregation completely. They filed a **lawsuit**, or court case, against the county school board.

They lost that case, but the lawsuit later became part of a famous Supreme Court case called *Brown v. Board of Education*. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was illegal according to the Constitution of the United States. Today, separate schools and drinking fountains are a thing of the past, the result of an **historic** change that began when a sixteen-year-old girl had the courage to stand up for what she believed was right.

## Glossary

**historic (adj.):** famous or important in history

**lawsuit (n.):** a process in which a court of law makes a decision or settles a disagreement between people

**protest (n.):** an event or action to show strong disapproval about something

**segregated (adj.):** limited to members of one group or one race

**strike (v.):** to refuse to do something until demands are granted

**Level Z**

Informational

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