Eyewitness to Jim Crow
Joan Johns Cobb Remembers

"I am very proud of the fact that my sister and the other students took a stand and decided to do something about getting a new school. I am happy that the decision they made happened to be part of *Brown v. Board* of Education decision of 1954.... So I guess you can say we all are a part of history."

[In 1951, Barbara Rose Johns, a 16 year old black high school girl in Prince Edward County, Virginia, led her classmates in a strike to protest the substandard conditions at Robert Russa Moton High School. Enlisting NAACP lawyers Spotswood Robinson and Oliver Hill to her cause, the lawyers filed suit at the federal courthouse in Richmond, Virginia demanding using the Moton High School case to end segregated schools in Virginia. They lost. In their appeal the lawyers incorporated the Moton case with three other similar suits that became known as Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka. Today, Moton High School, the scene of Barbara Johns' walkout, is a historic landmark and civil rights museum. Barbara Johns died in 1991. Joan Johns Cobb is her younger sister. In this passage Mrs. Cobb recounts the events leading up to the student strike.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- Barbara Johns was only 16 years old when she led the student strike in Farmville, Virginia in 1951, four years before Rosa Parks refused to change seats on that Montgomery bus. Consider the risks she encountered in taking such a stand.
- What were the other lawsuits involved in Brown v. Board of Education? What were the consequences of the decision?
- Research Virginia's Massive Resistance movement to Brown. Who led it and why?
- How did Prince Edward County finally come to reopen its schools?
- What is the Moton Museum today and what does it represent?

In 1951 my family was living in Arlington Heights, Virginia, which is in Prince Edward County, on a farm. My father was a farmer. My mother worked in Washington, D.C. during the week at the U.S. Navy Department. She would travel home on weekends. There were five children in the family--two girls and one boy. My sister, Barbara, was the eldest. I have three brothers: Ernest, Roderick and Robert.

In 1951 I was a freshman in high school. My three brothers were in elementary school at the time. My sister, Barbara, was a junior. The school I attended was Robert R. Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia. The school was for black students only. There was a white school in Farmville. I believe the name of it was Prince Edward School. We had separate facilities and most of the school supplies that we got were torn and tattered, and we didn't have enough supplies to write with.

The school we went to was overcrowded. Consequently, the county decided to build three tarpaper shacks for us to hold classes in. A tarpaper shack looks like a dilapidated black building, which is similar to a chicken coop on a farm. It's very unsightly. In winter the school was very cold. And a lot of times we had to put on our jackets. Now, the students that sat closest to the

wood stove were very warm and the ones who sat farthest away were very cold. And I remember being cold a lot of times and sitting in the classroom with my jacket on. When it rained, we would get water through the ceiling. So there were lots of pails sitting around the classroom. And sometimes we had to raise our umbrellas to keep the water off our heads. It was a very difficult setting for trying to learn.

And I remember we were always talking about how bad the conditions were but we didn't know what to do about it. So one day my sister and a group of students that she chose decided to do something about it.

My sister was sort of an introvert and she stayed to herself a lot. She was very studious, always reading books and going to the woods to, I guess, meditate. She never told me anything. And afterwards, I questioned her and asked her why she didn't mention it. And she said it was because she couldn't afford to tell anyone because it may have gotten out and it had to be a secret.

There was a music teacher by the name of Inez Davenport that Barbara confided in. When she discussed the conditions of the school with Miss Davenport, Miss Davenport said to her, finally, "Why don't you do something about it?" With that statement, Barbara said she decided to think about that. She tried to come up with a plan of what she could do to get a better school. And she decided to consult with the other four students. Between them they came up with the plan for the school strike.

The first experience that I had that there was something about to happen was when we were called to the assembly in school that day. We had these curtains on the stage that could open up when someone was going to come out for an assembly. That day, when the curtains opened it was my sister on stage rather than the principal. I was totally shocked. She walked up to the podium and she started to tell everyone about the fact that she wanted us to cooperate with her because the school was going out on a strike. I remember sitting in my seat and trying to go as low in the seat as I possibly could because I was so shocked and so upset. I actually was frightened because I knew that what she was doing was going to have severe consequences. I didn't know what they were going to be but I knew there were going to be some. She stood up there and addressed the school. She seemed to have everyone's attention.... At one point, she took off her shoe and she banged on the podium and said that we were going to go out on strike and would everyone please cooperate and "don't be afraid, just follow us out." So we did. The entire student body followed her out.

They had devised a plan for the principal to be away from the school at the moment. So one of the students--I believe it was John Watson--called from downtown to say that some of the students were hanging around downtown. So he [the principal] got in his car and drove down there to get the students and that's when she [Barbara] called the assembly and asked all the teachers to leave. They reluctantly left, all except one. I think one was a little persistent about staying but I believe that teacher eventually left too.

[We walked out] to the school grounds and awaited further instructions. Then later we were just loaded on the buses and went home, as usual. But I do remember being shocked and frightened ... not knowing what was going to happen next. Because I knew that you did not do anything in the community to upset the white establishment. And I knew something very bad was going to happen as a result of it.... It was April 23, 1951.

Over the next few days that we were home there was a lot of activity going on as far as meetings were concerned because we [the black student body] met at the First Baptist Church in Farmville, Virginia. Reverend [Leslie] Griffin was the pastor at that time.... I think Reverend Griffin advised

that the NAACP had to become involved in it. And somewhere along the way my sister decided to call Spotswood Robinson and Oliver Hill in Richmond, Virginia to see if they could help us.

Spotswood Robinson and Oliver Hill were lawyers.... It was my understanding that Mr. Robinson at first did not respond to the call because he was busy and so was Oliver Hill...they didn't have the time to come to Farmville to see what was going on. However, Mr. Oliver Hill would tell me later that he got a call from Barbara and she was very persistent. She told him that we needed him and that he just had to come.... He said that she said to him, "You must come and help us." He said she just kept calling him until he decided to take the case.

Over the next few weeks and months, life for the Prince Edward County blacks became uncertain and precarious.

We [the black community] were a separate entity. We were the black students and the black children. We had no interaction except for when you went to the supermarket or the department stores. Occasionally we had interaction on the farm in that some of our black fathers would work for the white farmers. And other than that, and seeing them in stores, we had no communication.

I do remember that we had a cross burned at the school.

My grandmother and some of the other family members [were] not able to go to the local stores and charge goods or food or whatever they had been doing before.... And I remember my uncle telling me, who was in the logging business, that he suffered too because they wouldn't allow him to have credit. So it was a financial strain on the black community after that happened. We were able to get credit for clothes and food at different times and that was all taken away.

People were afraid of lynchings. That was the thing that was foremost in everyone's mind. Because at the time, you still read of lynchings and you heard about lynchings. And so therefore, everyone was afraid that he or she would be lynched. Even, at the time, for talking back to a white person or in the case of the black men, speaking to a white woman. So we all lived with that type of fear. It was real. It was scary.

One weekend [in 1954] we traveled to Washington D.C. to visit one of my relatives, my aunt. And when we came back--actually before we got home--my uncle called up my aunt's house to tell us that our house was burning. And when we got back, we saw our house in flames--in ashes really. And to this day, we don't know what happened to our house.... I remember we had to live with my grandmother...during my senior year in high school.... Then in 1955 we moved to Washington, D.C.. That's where we stayed up until the time I got married and moved to New Jersey. I believe [my parents] decided to move because of jobs because at that time their financial situation was very critical. Because my father was farmer it was hard after the strike for him to get credit.

Barbara left the county in 1951. She went with my uncle Vernon Johns to live in Montgomery, Alabama. My parents decided that it was not a safe place for her to be for the school year coming up.

Vernon Johns, an uncle to Barbara and Joan Johns, was a minister and civil rights leader in Montgomery, Alabama. An early and outspoken proponent of civil rights, Reverend Johns so discomfited his congregation at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church that he eventually lost his pulpit. He was succeeded by young Martin Luther King, Jr.

My uncle Vernon Johns was an activist in his own right. However, he did not know anything about the strike at the time. Nor did he know that Barbara had been the leader of this strike. I think Barbara may have been influenced somewhat by Uncle Vernon's stands on activism and civil rights. Because Uncle Vernon was the type of person who was fearless. He said anything he that

he wanted to say to white people at any time and he was able to get away with it. Whereas most black people that I know of would have suffered consequences. He was the type of person that didn't seem to care about what would happen to him or whether anyone would try to harm him.... I observed this during our ride to Montgomery.... When we would get to the restrooms, there were restrooms for black people and white people.... he would always go to the white restroom. He would tell us, "Well, now since you know you are not allowed to go in the white restroom, I am not going to send you in there and expose you to the problems you may incur, but I am going in there." And he did. I remember wondering how in the world he could go in the white restroom and I couldn't go in the white restroom. But it was because he never seemed to be afraid of white people whereas we were at the time.

And I remember that he was on a train, traveling somewhere, and they told him that he needed to move. He said he was reading his newspaper and he looked up at the conductor and said to him, "I'm very comfortable right here." And he kept on reading his newspaper.... Because he was a minister, however, he was very outspoken. And sometimes he caused blacks as well as whites to be angry with him because he would try to motivate the black community to not sit around and be afraid but to take some kind of stance.

And with us children, he was always trying to get us to answer his questions. He had a lot of questions about black history. Every time we saw him, we had to answer a question for him. We felt that in order to be able to talk to him we had to know the answer to those questions because no matter when he saw you, he would ask you a question. So sometimes we tried to avoid him because we may not have known the answer. But it motivated us to read and look up the answer so that the next time we saw him, we could answer his questions. And he did this to us every day.... So as I look back, I think that he was trying to teach us, in his own way about our history and how to be able to live a life without fear. But it was difficult to achieve at the time.

I don't believe Barbara knew anything about the fact that this [her walk-out] would change the course of history. However, I remember her being so excited and shouting about it when the decision came down and we heard about it.... I don't think she knew that what she and the other students did would have any kind of impact on the nation that resulted in the Brown v. Board of Education case.

Reacting to the Brown decision, the Virginia legislature passed a number of laws empowering the state to close local schools in defiance of federally mandated integration. Although federal courts nullified the laws in 1959, the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors closed the public high school. White students attended a private tuition-free academy but 1,800 black students received no public education until federal courts finally succeeded in reopening the school in 1964, five years later.

The decision was made to close the schools rather than to integrate the schools. That was why it was done but we never understood how it was allowed to happen for such a long time. We wondered why no one intervened and said that this was illegal.

My husband's brothers were affected and they had to go away to school.... There were some white people who were Quakers who came to Prince Edward County and decided to see that some of the students went to school. So they placed them in homes--in most cases, in white homes. I have three brother-in-laws who went to school in different states and they were placed with white families and that's how they got their education. And I understand there were a lot of other students in the community that were able to go to other schools through the Quakers. However, there were a lot of students who weren't able to go and never got an education at all. I was talking to one of the students who did not get an education about two years ago and he was very bitter about what had happened. He said they were forgotten. They were the forgotten people there.

Mrs. Cobb discusses what became of Barbara Johns after she left Prince Edward County in 1951.

Barbara went to Montgomery, finished high school there, then went to Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Then she came home after two years there and announced to my parents that she wanted to get married at the age of 19.... She finished that year at Spelman, I believe. Then she started to raise a family. She had five children--four girls and one boy. She and her husband moved to Philadelphia. She became a librarian there and she remained a librarian throughout her lifetime.... She finished her school at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

Not too many people asked her any questions about what happened during that time. Barbara was not the type of person to talk much about what happened. She only talked if you asked her questions about it. Other than that, she didn't have much to say about what happened. After she settled down and raised a family, I don't think she was active at all that I recall.

There were times when I longed for the country and sometimes I still long for a country life. So we have a house there now. My sister decided to get us together to put a house back on our own old home plot that had burned down.... However she died in 1991 before it was completed. So we think our house there is now like a legacy to her because she tried so hard to have it done before she died. But I remember her working feverishly to get it done the year that she died.... She talked of retiring there.... We both have a very deep fondness for the area despite everything that happened....Despite the problems we had, we feel there have been changes and that you could go back there and live and be very content now.

I do think that it is a painful period in history for the white community and Prince Edward County.... There is a lot of denial that anything happened that should be of importance to anybody coming outside. So I really don't think that--in my view--the community to this day acknowledges that this happened. Until recently, when Hampden-Sidney College and Longwood College decided to become involved in what happened in Prince Edward County. Hampden-Sidney had a symposium on race. So I think that maybe now there are a lot of people that may be interested. But I still think the ones that I talked to from Hampden-Sidney and Longwood College [were] not the local people that grew up there.

I feel very proud of the fact that my sister and the other students took a stand and decided to do something about getting a new school. I am happy that the decision they made happened to be part of the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954. I think it was wonderful and almost unbelievable that they played a role in bringing about that case. I'm very proud of that. I'm very proud of the role my sister played in all of this. I'm just beginning to really appreciate how important it was and what a great thing she did at the age of 16. When I think about it now, it's just awesome. I can hardly believe it happened. Whereas I was a freshman then, I don't feel I had any real role except to follow instructions. So I guess you may say we all are a part of history. I give all the credit to my sister and the fellow students that planned the strike and really carried it out. It's incredible.