

Black History is American History



BARBARA ROSE JOHNS was 16 years old when she decided to do something about the injustice of “separate but equal” schools” “Separate but equal” rulings stated that it was legal for government entities and institutions to keep people of different races apart, if the resources were the same in value and quality. The reality was far from true. White schools were maintained; Black schools were not. White students received new books, Black student received torn, outdated and tattered books.

In 1951, Barbara courageously organized a protest of her school's inequality by convincing the entire student body to walk out of school and protest at City Hall. She led about 450 of her peers in an impressive protest. After asking the teachers to leave, Johns delivered the speech that convinced the entire student body to walk out of school to protest the severe overcrowding and unequal conditions endured by black students in the county. The students remained on strike for two weeks. They gained support from the NAACP and other civil rights groups. The NAACP filed a lawsuit on the students' behalf, sparking a media frenzy that brought attention to the issue of school segregation.

The NAACP case was known as *Dorothy Davis et al v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, and attempted to dismantle the philosophy of separate but equal. This case was eventually grouped into the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case, which resulted in racial school segregation being deemed illegal and unconstitutional. Of those grouped into *Brown v Board of Education*, Barbara John's case was the only case originating from a student-led protest.

Barbara is immortalized in a statue that is part of the National Sanctuary Hall Collection of the US Capitol. The statue was unveiled in Emancipation Hall on December 16, 2025, and is currently placed in the Crypt, joining other statues that represent the first 13 states. It represents Virginia replacing the statue of General Robert E. Lee.

Quiz

1. Black History Month was the brainchild of:
a. George Washington Carver b. Carter G. Woodson c. Dorothy Height
2. How many African American officers were originally commission in Navy?
a. 16 b. 14 c. 13 d. 12
3. Why was February chosen as the month to celebrate Black History?
a. It was the shortest month
b. b. It coincided with the birthday of Abraham Lincoln and Fredreck Douglas

Black History is American History



THE GOLDEN THIRTEEN were the first African American men to be commissioned into the US Navy.

In June 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order prohibiting ethnic and racial discrimination by federal agencies or contractors involved in the defense industry.

In April 1942, thanks to protests and pressure from civil rights leaders and the black press, the Navy allowed black men into the general service ratings for the first time. Responding to pressure from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Adlai Stevenson, in January 1944, the Navy began an officer training course for 16 African American enlisted men.

To ensure their failure, the normal training period of 16 weeks was reduced to 8 weeks for the black cadets. When they realized that someone in the Navy wanted them to wash out, the cadets covered up the windows of their barracks and studied all night. When they were tested, the entire group passed with marks higher than the white cadets. Disbelief in the chain of command that an all-black cadet class could achieve higher scores than an all-white one meant that the black sailors had to suffer the indignity of retaking their tests. This time they scored even higher with an average grade of 3.89 out of 4—the highest average of any class in Navy history at the time.

Despite the success of all 16 cadets, only 13 were commissioned, 12 Ensigns and 1 Warrant Officer. The Navy never explained why only 13 achieved rank. It is speculated that the pass rate was brought down to 75%, the level of the average class of white cadets.

Because Navy policy barred blacks from being assigned to combat ships, the first class of black officers were assigned to command shore logistics units, small tug and tender ships, and training African American enlisted.

Quiz Answers: 1-b, 2-c, 3-b