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PE To Shine Light Of Reconciliation

*Illumination Will Honor Johns, Classmates; Promote Steps Toward A More Perfect Union*

**By ROB CHAPMAN**

PRINCE EDWARD — The County's courthouse, once eye of a storm in the legal fight to end segregation in public schools, will offer a beacon of hope.

County supervisors, following up on the suggestion of Farmville District (801) Supervisor Mattie Wiley, unanimously agreed Tuesday night to place a light of reconciliation atop the building.

"...We are gradually moving forward and we would like for this growth to continue so, as a reminder of the very important struggle for civil rights, I would like to see...illuminated lighting on top of the Prince Edward County courthouse as a reminder to all of the students of the R. R. Moton High School and all the others involved in that...situation," Ms. Wiley explained.

On April 23, 1951, at a time when separate school systems were the accepted norm across America, sixteen year old Barbara Johns and a group of Moton High School students marched from the intersection of Griffin Boulevard and Main Streets to the superintendent's office in the courthouse in downtown Farmville to protest separate but unequal schools.

What began as a protest of facilities eventually found its way to the courts where the local case would be wrapped into one of five that would become *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 that ended segregation on public education.

The High Court's decision struck down the concept of "separate but equal" established in the earlier *Plessey v. Ferguson* high court ruling. The Virginia Constitution, however, was amended to authorize the General Assembly and local governing bodies to appropriate funds to assist students to go to public or nonsectarian private schools.

Rather than integrate, Prince Edward—as did some other localities—closed public schools.

For Prince Edward, that meant no public schools from 1959-1964.

"...Being a part of the tragedy, my memories were awakened when it was brought to...my attention that, because Prince Edward was where this history started, it would be fitting and proper for all the citizens of this county to begin a healing process to right some of those wrongs brought to this County because of the school closing," Ms. Wiley explained.

Ms. Wiley, who was an eighth grader when the schools closed and had to complete her education in Ohio and New York, thanked *Herald* Editor Ken Woodley for bringing the thought of the reconciliation light to her.

Woodley, a regional representative on the state's Civil Rights Memorial Committee, noted plans for a two-day celebration of the unveiling of the Civil Rights memorial in July 20-21.

The memorial, the statue is "virtually a memorial to people from Prince Edward County," he cited, when asked by Ms. Wiley to comment.

What better way to respond, he suggested, and doing something simultaneously here than to shine a light.

The plan is to first illuminate the cupola at dusk on July 21 after the memorial is unveiled in Richmond.

"...It was those young people who helped America see the light and they shone a light themselves that day in 1951 that went to the heart and soul of this country and to our birth certificate that all people are created equal," Woodley said.

"And a light atop this courthouse where so many decisions were made in the 50s and where the students visited the school superintendent that day in 1951, but where other decisions have been made through the years that have been bringing people together. This light of reconciliation would be a memorial, an honor, a tribute to those Prince Edward residents who are being given the supreme honor of a statue in Richmond on the Capitol grounds, but it would be our hope, too, that, as people come here—whether they work here or visit here—as they incline their heads to look at this light, that they would also incline their hearts and minds to continue the work of reconciliation that needs to continue in this community and this state and this nation," he said.

What better way for the County, Woodley suggested, to continue to show the nation, to help America see the light, and to shine a light that needs to be shone.

The new light is intended to be a perpetual light. Ms. Wiley suggested an annual ceremony and fellow board member, Farmville District (701) Supervisor Sally Gilfillan, suggested that, after the first event July 21, that it coincide with either the walkout or the day the schools reopened.

"...So it's a day that has meaning for what actually happened," she said. "And that the board sponsor on that day each year a series of dialogue."

Placing a light at the top of the cupola is doable, according to County Administrator Wade Bartlett. He noted that they would discuss with lighting companies the best way. They can come back to the board in June or July with plans, Bartlett cited.

Chairman Fore appointed a committee to establish criteria to bring back to the board for approval. The committee will consist of Vice Chairman Howard Simpson, Ms. Wiley, Ms. Gilfillan, Flossie Moore (wife of Leigh District Supervisor James Moore who as also impacted by the school closing), and Woodley.

One of the issues to be worked out will be the wording of a permanent marker.

So that those who gaze upon the beacon will understand its meaning.