

# In Farmville, Va., Landmarks of a Landmark Case

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I was sitting in Cafe Zelia in downtown [Farmville](#), Va., and for the first and only time that day, I wasn't alone.

For hours, I'd been following [Virginia's](#) Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail, which spotlights 41 sites spread across 13 counties to the east and west of [Richmond](#). Signs tell the stories of philanthropic whites and industrious blacks who established schools to provide an education for African American children when there was none.



Student protests against school segregation in Virginia's Prince Edward County became part of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. (The *Richmond Times-Dispatch*)

But in all my stops, I saw no one else reading up on this history.

Now at the cafe, I was digging into a black bean burrito and surveying the crowd around me. I realized they'd all come to Farmville, about 60 miles west of the state capital, for its furniture warehouses, not the historical sites. Everyone around me seemed more interested in catalogues of dining room sets than in one of the most compelling stories of the civil rights movement.

But they were sitting in the midst of it. If not for the rules of the [U.S. Supreme Court](#), the 1954 decision that ordered an end to segregation in schools would be known as *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*. The suit was named for Dorothy E. Davis, a freshman who joined a strike against the deplorable conditions of Farmville's only high school for blacks, and the white school board that oversaw it. (Once the Davis case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, the justices merged it with four other cases, giving top billing to Oliver L. Brown of [Topeka, Kan.](#))

I sensed that Farmville, once the center of the county's tobacco trade, had had a vibrant downtown when the court case was filed. Today, though, Main Street has several vacant storefronts. Most of the active businesses are either selling furniture or are restaurants and coffee shops serving shoppers who are giving their credit cards a rest.

In 1951, the horseshoe-shaped Moton High School, about a mile from downtown, was the only facility for the 450 black teenagers in Prince Edward County. To relieve overcrowding (Moton was built to hold 180 students), the school board built tarpaper shacks without running water, central heat or other amenities. These days, the red-brick building is the Robert Russa Moton Museum. On a sign in front of the museum, I noticed the contrast between the dilapidated shacks and the well-dressed students. One picture shows the African American boys wearing suits with ties and the girls in sweaters and skirts, while the other shows a hut better suited for storing farm equipment than educating children. The museum is open most Saturdays (but closed on the holiday weekend I was there) and includes exhibits about the strike and the Davis case.

The students started their strike in 1951 to protest the inadequate resources and to demand a school as nice as the one that whites attended. Soon, black leaders sued the school board with the help of lawyers from the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#). Then came the Supreme Court's Brown decision.

But the victory was a hollow one in Farmville, as it was in many other communities. "Integration was postponed in every way it could be," says the sign in front of Prince Edward County High School, built in 1953 for black students in an attempt to prove the school board was offering separate but equal facilities.

In 1959, facing yet another court order to integrate schools, the school board voted to close all public schools rather than integrate them. Although it was one of many Virginia districts that tried the tactic, others stopped their protests within a month and started on the path to integration. Prince Edward County kept all of its public schools closed for five years. During that time, privileged whites attended a private academy established to replace the public schools for whites.

At other nearby spots on the historic trail, I learned how the black community created learning opportunities for the children. The pastor of the downtown Beulah [African Methodist Episcopal Church](#) arranged for students in Moton High's Class of 1960 to earn their diplomas at Kittrell College in [North Carolina](#). Across the street, the First Baptist Church organized tutoring programs. Students from Hampden-Sydney College traveled several miles into town to tutor others.

But many black children received no formal schooling until the Supreme Court ordered Prince Edward County to reopen its schools in 1964. The school board complied. In 2004, the Virginia state legislature created scholarships to assist those who were denied education for the years the schools were closed.

It's hard to escape the irony of what happened when schools finally integrated. Eleven years after Prince Edward High opened, it became the county's *only* high school. Now, after several additions and renovations, it continues to educate students of all races.

When I returned home, I told my friends the story of the Prince Edward County schools, studying their stunned reactions. They'd heard the stories of the Brown case, the fight over busing in [Boston](#) and other famous civil rights watermarks. But none knew about the battle in a little town west of Richmond. It's a story that deserves to be told, and on the Heritage Trail, it finally is.