In a partnership with VMHC, the John Marshall Center has created a set of lesson plans to complement the VMHC’s exhibition,

**Determined: the 400-year struggle for Black Equality**

This is lesson 4: **MARY S. PEAKE + BARBARA JOHNS**

A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM AND EQUALITY (HS)

- First Enslaved Africans arrive in Jamestown
- Triangular Slave Trade Established
- James Armistead Lafayette receives freedom
- Declaration of Independence
- Madison Washington leads a rebellion on the Creole
- Fugitive Slave Act
- Civil War begins
- Anthony Burns convicted of being a fugitive slave
- Emancipation Proclamation signed
- Peter Jacob Carter elected
- Chimborazo School opens
- Civil Rights Act of 1964 + Voting Rights Act of 1965
- Barbara Johns leads student strike
- Civil War begins
- Emancipation Proclamation signed
- Peter Jacob Carter elected
- Brown v. Board of Education
THROUGHOUT U.S. HISTORY, AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN HAVE PLAYED AN UNDENIABLE ROLE IN FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM AND EQUALITY. VISIONARY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ALIKE RADICALLY IMAGINED A NEW WORLD OUTSIDE OF WHAT THEIR EXISTING CONDITIONS PRESCRIBED.

BY UTILIZING EDUCATION AS A PRIMARY TOOL FOR THEIR RESISTANCE, TEACHING BECAME A WAY TO FIGHT FOR EQUALITY, BOTH IN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM.

-OUR ANCESTOR’S WILDEST DREAMS BY DUNN + NEAL

OBJECTIVE

DESCRIBE HOW THE LIVES OF MARY S. PEAKE AND BARBARA JOHNS ILLUSTRATE THE ACADEMIC CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS AFRICAN AMERICANS EXPERIENCED OVER TIME.
Oppress

The cruel or unjust treatment of one person by another person in a position of control.

Brown vs.
The Board of Education

1954 Supreme Court case which ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

Academic

Relating to education.

Literacy

The ability to read and write.

V O C A B U L A R Y

You Will Find The Following Terms Throughout Your Activity. Understanding These Terms Will Be Important For Completing This Assignment.
First Enslaved Africans arrive in Jamestown

1619

Virginia passes a law making it illegal for enslaved Africans to meet for the purpose of learning to read + write

1829

Mary S Peake dies

1861

Civil War begins + Peake started a school near Fort Monroe

1862

Emancipation Proclamation signed

1863

January 1865

13th Amendment ratified + Chimborazo School opens

1865

Mary S Peake dies

1869

Emancipation Proclamation signed

1862

1863

1865

1877

Emancipation Proclamation signed

1877

Compromise of 1877

1896

Plessy v. Ferguson

1951

Brown v. Board of Education

1954

Barbara Johns leads student strike

April 1951
A 1829 Virginia law declared every meeting of enslaved Africans, at any school, by day or night, for instruction in reading or writing, an unlawful assembly. Any Justice may inflict twenty lashes on each person found in a school.

The Alabama Slave Code of 1833 included the following law: “Any person who shall attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read or write, shall upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum of not less than two hundred fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars.”

A North Carolina law stated that teaching an enslaved African to read, write, or even to provide them with a book was to be punished with thirty-nine lashes, or imprisonment if the offender be a free African American (but if a white, then with a fine of 200 dollars).

BEFORE LEARNING ABOUT MARY S. PEAKE, LET’S ANALYZE THREE LAWS THAT IMPACTED EDUCATION DURING THE EXISTENCE OF SLAVERY:

WHAT DO THESE THREE LAWS HAVE IN COMMON?

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THESE LAWS?

HOW WAS DENYING ACCESS TO EDUCATION USED TO OPPRESS AFRICAN AMERICANS?
MARY S. PEAKE

Peake was born free in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1823. At a young age, she was sent to live with her aunt in Alexandria near Washington, DC. There, she attended a school for African Americans; however, after ten years, her schooling was interrupted when the United States Congress enacted a law that stopped education for free Blacks in Virginia. As a result, all schools for free Black people were closed, and education for enslaved Black people was outlawed.

After relocating with her family to Hampton, Virginia, Peake's teaching career began. While supporting herself as a dressmaker, Peake secretly taught enslaved and free African Americans of all ages to read and write in her home, even though it was forbidden by Virginia law.

During the Civil War, Peake was one of a small number of Black women sanctioned by the U.S government to teach despite local laws prohibiting the education of African Americans. As a result, Peake started a school near Fort Monroe for those who fled enslavement. She initially taught her students at the foot of an oak tree (now known as Emancipation Oak), but ultimately was provided a cottage to serve as her classroom, which is recognized as the very first building of what is now Hampton University.

Following the Civil War, her teachings helped the African American community in Hampton to develop a literacy rate that outpaced most other southern communities. Peake's school served as a model for the freedmen's schools established throughout the South during Reconstruction.
Mary S. Peake's teaching activities at Fort Monroe garnered the support of the American Missionary Association (AMA), an abolitionist organization that helped establish hundreds of Black schools and colleges, including Hampton. Despite her failing health, Peake rejected her physician's advice to abandon her education work or be “lost to earth.” In this letter, Lockwood reflected on how Peake was committed to the mission of educating freedmen even on her deathbed. He stated, “It was beautiful, though sad, to see her as I did, when too sick to sit, lying upon her bed, surrounded by her scholars, teaching them to read.”

Mary Peake died at the age of 39.
WHAT ACADEMIC SUCCESSES DID AFRICAN AMERICANS EXPERIENCE OVER TIME?

WHAT ACADEMIC CHALLENGES DID AFRICAN AMERICANS CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE?

DESpite the challenges they faced and years separating them, what can we learn from the lives and actions of Mary S. Peake and Barbara Johns?
Describe some of the challenges African Americans faced in accessing an education while they were enslaved.

Describe Mary S. Peake’s efforts to help African Americans achieve equal access to education.
Watch one (or both) of the interviews from participants in the walk out + answer the questions below.

Whose interview did you watch? What was their connection to the walk out?

What challenges did your interviewee describe?

Or troubling about this interview? What do you find surprising, interesting,
BEFORE LEARNING ABOUT BARBARA JOHNS, LET’S ANALYZE TWO IMAGES THAT SHOW THE STATE OF SCHOOLS DURING THE JIM CROW ERA.

**TWO WATER FOUNTAINS FOUND INSIDE A WHITES-ONLY SCHOOL.**

**THE ONLY WATER FOUNTAIN, LOCATED OUTSIDE, AT AN ALL BLACK SCHOOL.**

**USING THE IMAGES ON THE LEFT, DESCRIBE THE DIFFERENCES YOU NOTICE BETWEEN THE TWO SCHOOLS.**

**WHAT ACADEMIC CHALLENGES DO YOU THINK AFRICAN AMERICANS WILL FACE DURING JIM CROW?**

**HOW ARE THE BUILDING CONDITIONS IN SCHOOLS AN EXAMPLE OF OPPRESSION EXPERIENCED BY AFRICAN AMERICANS?**
Barbara Johns was born in New York City in 1935, and grew up during the Jim Crow era in Prince Edward County, Virginia, where Black and white students attended separate schools. The conditions of the African-American schools were much worse than the whites-only schools. Johns attended Robert Russa Moton High School, the only high school for Black students, which suffered from overcrowding and poor facilities. The building was built to fit 150 students, but by the 1950s had more than 400 students enrolled. The county's all-white school board erected three tar-paper-covered buildings on school grounds as a solution, but those were so shabby that they were described by Black students as "chicken shacks."

On April 23, 1951, Johns took a stand against the unequal treatment of African-American students in the county. She bravely stood in front of 450 of her fellow students at an assembly and delivered an impassioned speech urging them to join her in a strike against the school district. Following her lead, the students left the school in protest of the sub-par conditions. This walkout was one of the first of its kind across the nation.

Johns's courage and the persistence of her fellow students inspired the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons) to pursue a legal challenge to the conditions at Moton H.S. Attorneys Oliver W. Hill and Spottswood Robinson III agreed to help, and brought a suit against Prince Edward County that sought to end racial segregation in schools. This case, Davis v. Prince Edward, would eventually become part of Brown v. Board of Education, the 1954 United States Supreme Court case that declared “separate but equal” schools unconstitutional and ended school segregation across the nation.

To honor Johns's contributions, it was recently announced that a statue of Barbara will soon represent the Commonwealth of Virginia in the U.S. Capitol building, following the 2020 removal of the Robert E. Lee statue which stood for 111 years in that location.
Describe some of the challenges African Americans faced in accessing an equal education during the Jim Crow era.

Describe Barbara Johns's role in the struggle to increase educational opportunities for African Americans.