# 2016 STRONG MEN & WOMEN IN VIRGINIA HISTORY

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## Anne Bethel Spencer

**1882–1975 | Lynchburg**

**POET**

Poet **Anne Spencer** (February 6, 1882–July 27, 1975) was born Annie Bethel Bannister in Henry County, and after her parents separated she grew up as Annie Scales (her mother's maiden name) in Mercer County, West Virginia. She graduated from Virginia Seminary (later Virginia University of Lynchburg) in 1899 and married fellow student Edward Spencer in 1901. They settled in Lynchburg, where they built a house and raised three children.

Spencer fought racial discrimination and in 1913 helped establish a Lynchburg branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. A visiting NAACP field agent read Spencer's poetry and urged her to publish. Her first known poem appeared in *The Crisis* under the name Anne Spencer. Her work, most notably associated with the Harlem Renaissance, was well received and has appeared in numerous anthologies, earning Spencer recognition as an acclaimed American poet. She also influenced many of the African-American writers and artists—among them W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson—who stayed with the Spencers while traveling because few Virginia hotels were open to African Americans.

In 1924 Spencer became the librarian at Lynchburg's only branch open to African Americans, which was located at the segregated Dunbar High School. She built its collection, sometimes with her own books, and shaped the reading habits of a generation of students until her retirement in 1945. She gradually withdrew from public life, although she continued to write. In 1976 her house was placed on the Virginia Landmarks Register.

## Thomas Cannon Sr.

**1925–2005 | Richmond**

**PHILANTHROPIST**

**Thomas Cannon** (August 3, 1925–July 2, 2005) grew up in Chase City in a home with no electricity or plumbing and attended segregated schools until the seventh grade, when he left to support his family. During World War II, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served as a signalman, a position then held by few African Americans. Cannon narrowly escaped harm on several occasions while in service, and later stated that this "made me believe that I was being preserved for something" and greatly influenced his philanthropy. He settled in Richmond, where he married and returned to school. In 1954 he earned an art degree from Hampton Institute (later Hampton University) and eventually worked for the U.S. Postal Service.

In 1972 Cannon began donating money, frequently choosing people who had been featured in the news. His recipients included people who had experienced great hardships or had performed distinguishing acts of heroism, generosity, or community service. On one occasion he boarded city buses to hand out envelopes filled with money. Although his annual salary never exceeded $25,000, Cannon funded his philanthropy by living simply. With his wife's support, Cannon gave away more than $156,000. His generosity and unwavering spirit drew local and national recognition. After a report mentioned the poor condition of his house, a local developer helped organize a fund to give the Cannons a new home. In his final days Cannon requested that people honor him by helping others as he did throughout his life.

## Clarence M. Dunnaville Jr.

**1933– | Attorney**

**ROANOKE**

**Clarence M. Dunnaville Jr.'s** interest in civil rights began at the age of nine, when the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross at his Roanoke home. While attending Morgan State College (later Morgan State University), he picketed segregated theaters and participated in sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters. In 1957 he earned a law degree from Saint John's University School of Law.

The first African-American attorney with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, Dunnaville was appointed by Robert F. Kennedy as an assistant U.S. attorney general for the Southern District of New York. While working as an attorney for Western Electric (part of AT&T), Dunnaville volunteered in 1967 with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law to protect African Americans' voting rights in Mississippi, where a shotgun-wielding deputy sheriff chased him from the town of Marks. In New York, Dunnaville championed opportunities for minority entrepreneurs, serving as executive director of the Interracial Council for Business Opportunity and developing the black-owned skyscraper that once housed former President Bill Clinton's office in Harlem.

He returned to Virginia in 1990 and joined civil rights attorney Oliver W. Hill's Richmond law firm. Dunnaville later opened his own practice and continues to promote equal access to justice. He is dedicated to improving pro bono services for underserved Virginians and advocates restorative justice to break the cycle of the school-to-prison pipeline. Dunnaville has received numerous awards, including the Virginia State Bar Diversity Conference's first Achievement Award, which was renamed in his honor.

## Claude Grandford Perkins

**1941– | Richmond**

**PRESIDENT OF VIRGINIA UNION UNIVERSITY**

**Claude G. Perkins's** work at Virginia Union University has been truly transformational. Growing up in Mississippi, he understood the value of education and later earned an M.A. from Purdue University, and a Ph.D. from Ohio University. He began his distinguished career in education with the school system of Clark County, Nevada, where he oversaw its desegregation program and became its first African-American school superintendent. He came to Virginia as an assistant superintendent for secondary education with the Richmond City Public Schools and later oversaw all of the city's schools and operations. Perkins was the founding director of the Center for Educational Leadership at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, where he earned tenure status as a full professor. He later served as graduate dean and associate vice president for academic affairs at Albany State University in Georgia.

Perkins came out of retirement in 2009 to become the 12th president of Virginia Union University. Building on his impressive record of academic leadership, he has focused on making student achievement the university's top priority and has worked to expand scholarship opportunities, hire new faculty, and develop new academic programs. During his tenure the endowment has increased nearly 50 percent and campus facilities have been improved. Reflecting his personal community involvement, VUU student volunteerism in the Richmond area has grown to record levels and been recognized nationally. Despite the challenges faced during his tenure, Perkins's efforts have garnered national rankings for the university and set VUU on the path to long-term success.

## Mamie Evelyn Locke

**1954– | Hampton**

**LEGISLATOR**

Growing up in Mississippi as one of 11 children, **Mamie Locke** honed her political skills at a young age. After graduating from Tougaloo College, she earned an M.A. (1978) and a Ph.D. (1984) in political science from Atlanta University (later Clark Atlanta University). In 1981 she joined the faculty of Hampton University, where she continues to teach political science and history; she also served as assistant dean and as dean of its School of Liberal Arts. She has published articles and book chapters on the issues of gender and race in politics.

Struck by the inequity of decisions made by the Hampton City Council, Locke decided to seek office. Although not successful in her first attempt, she was elected to the city council in 1996. She served as vice mayor from 1998 to 2000, when she won election as mayor, becoming the first African-American woman to do so in Hampton.

In 2003 Locke became the third African-American woman to win a seat in the Senate of Virginia. Representing the Second District, she has been a strong advocate for education, women's rights, affordable housing, an increased minimum wage, and equity in the criminal justice system. From 2008 to 2011, she chaired the Senate's General Laws and Technology Committee. She is vice chair of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Commission, and she chairs the Legislative Black Caucus. As an elected representative, Locke believes she has a responsibility to improve the lives of those she serves.

## Leroy Rountree Hassell Sr.

**1955–2011 | Norfolk**

**JUDGE**

From the start, **Leroy Hassell** (August 17, 1955–February 9, 2011) showed a tendency toward greatness. He excelled as a student, became a champion debater, and was voted "most likely to succeed" in high school. He attended the University of Virginia, where he earned the coveted distinction of residing in a room on the Lawn (the original grounds designed by Thomas Jefferson) before graduating in 1977. While at Harvard Law School, Hassell worked on the *Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* and earned his J.D. in 1980. He joined a Richmond law firm, becoming a partner in 1987. During this time Hassell served as co-counsel to the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority and also became chairman of the Richmond School Board.

Although Hassell had no judicial experience, his integrity and legal skills were recognized, and in 1989 the governor named the 34-year-old lawyer to the Supreme Court of Virginia. In 2002, after a new law permitted the court to choose the chief justice, its members elected Hassell, who was sworn in as Virginia's first African-American chief justice in February 2003. He advocated an independent judiciary and greater access to legal services for all Virginians, and he established a commission to reform Virginia's mental health laws. For more than a decade, Hassell also served as jurist-in-residence at Regent University's law school, where he taught and mentored future lawyers, stressing the necessary commitment to excellence, integrity, and professionalism. In 2011, shortly before his death, the Virginia Bar Association honored Hassell with its Distinguished Service Award.

## Melody C. Barnes

**1964– | Richmond**

**ATTORNEY AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL**

Growing up in Richmond, **Melody Barnes** absorbed her parents' lessons about the importance of education, hard work, and common sense. After graduating from the city's public schools, she earned a B.A. with honors from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1986 and a J.D. from the University of Michigan in 1989. Two years later she began her career in public service as assistant counsel to the U.S. House of Representatives' Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, where she played a role in the enactment of the Voting Rights Improvement Act of 1992. As director of legislative affairs for the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Barnes used her influence to promote equality. In 1995 she began working for Sen. Edward Kennedy on the Senate Judiciary Committee, serving as his chief counsel from 1998 until 2003 and helping shape laws related to civil rights, women's health, and religious liberties.

Barnes was the executive vice president for policy at the Center for American Progress when she became a policy advisor for Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008. As president, Obama tapped Barnes for the post of director of the White House Domestic Policy Council. During her three years as domestic policy director, she oversaw reforms focused on education and health care. Since leaving the White House in 2012, Barnes has continued to fulfill her passion for public service as a vice provost at New York University and chair of the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund.

## Michael Robinson

**1983– | Football Player and Youth Mentor**

**RICHMOND**

As a star athlete at Varina High School, **Michael Robinson** demonstrated the talent and drive that would take him to the National Football League. Playing quarterback at Pennsylvania State University, he led the team to the Big Ten Championship in 2005. That year he was named Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year by the conference coaches and finished fifth in the Heisman Award voting. Drafted in the fourth round by the San Francisco 49ers in 2006, Robinson switched to running back and scored two touchdowns his rookie season. Signed by the Seattle Seahawks in 2010, he played fullback and was a key member of the special teams. His career highlight came in February 2014 at Super Bowl XLVIII when the Seahawks defeated the heavily favored Denver Broncos, after which he retired from the NFL. His career statistics include 115 carries for 422 yards and two touchdowns, along with 75 receptions for 610 yards and three touchdowns.

A three-time Academic All-Big Ten selection at Penn State, Robinson graduated with a B.A. in advertising and public relations and a B.A. in journalism. A sought-after NFL analyst, he also has produced and hosted his own sports talk show. In 2010 Robinson established the Excel to Excellence foundation in Richmond to help disadvantaged children. Its projects include Team Excel, a program he developed in which athletes mentor students who compete for prizes by excelling in their school performance and in community service participation. Through his foundation, Robinson strives to make a difference in students' lives.

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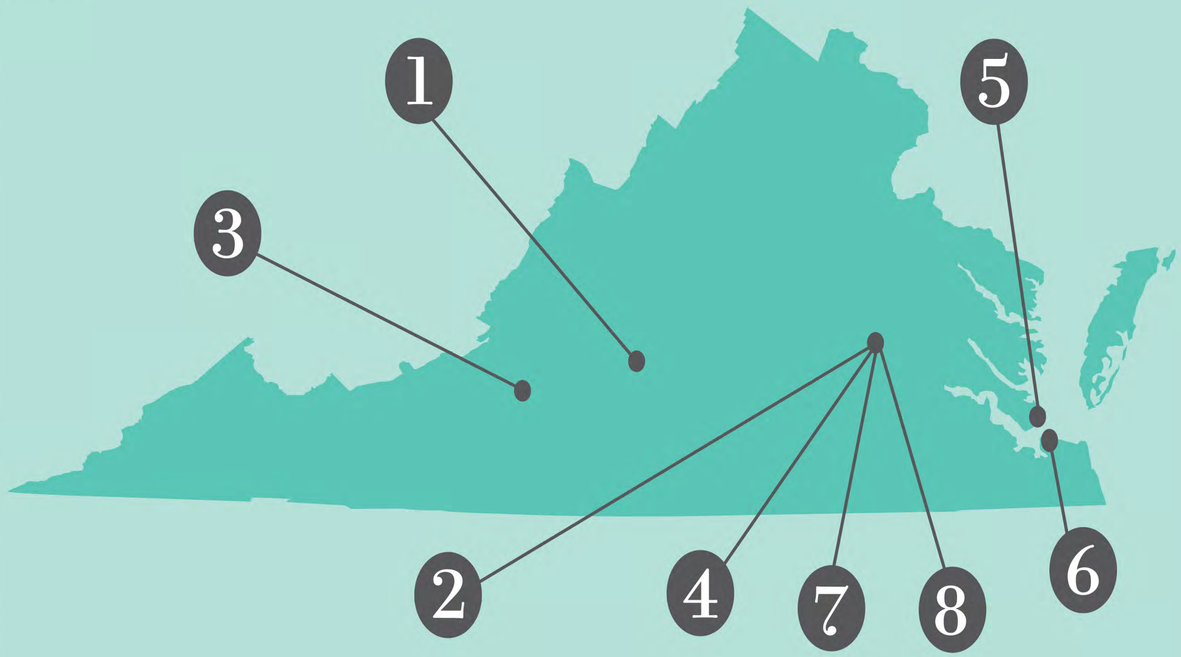
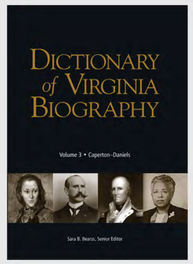
4. Claude Grandford Perkins
5. Mamie Evelyn Locke
6. Leroy Rountree Hassell Sr.
7. Melody C. Barnes
8. Michael Robinson




Learn more about distinguished African Americans from Virginia in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1998–2006) and on the Library of Virginia's websites, www.lva.virginia.gov and www.virginiamemory.com. Instructional materials, classroom activities, and nomination forms for the 2017 project are available at www.lva.virginia.gov/smw.

*A joint project of the Library of Virginia and Dominion.*

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## *Anne Bethel Spencer*

1882–1975
Lynchburg
POET

Harlem Renaissance poet Anne Bethel Spencer was also an advocate for the civil rights of African Americans.

## *Thomas Cannon Sr.*

1925–2005
Richmond
PHILANTHROPIST

A postal worker who lived frugally, Thomas Cannon Sr. was a philanthropist who gave away more than $156,000 during his lifetime.

## *Clarence M. Dunnaville Jr.*

1933–
Roanoke
ATTORNEY

Attorney and civil rights activist Clarence M. Dunnaville Jr. advocates equal justice and equal opportunities for all Americans.

## *Claude Grandford Perkins*

1941–
Richmond
PRESIDENT OF VIRGINIA UNION UNIVERSITY

Appointed the 12th president of Virginia Union University in 2009, Claude Grandford Perkins has worked tirelessly to expand the school's horizons and preserve its future.

## *Mamie Evelyn Locke*

1954–
Hampton
LEGISLATOR

Mamie Evelyn Locke is the first African-American woman to serve as mayor of Hampton and the third African-American woman elected to the Senate of Virginia.

## *Leroy Rountree Hassell Sr.*

1955–2011
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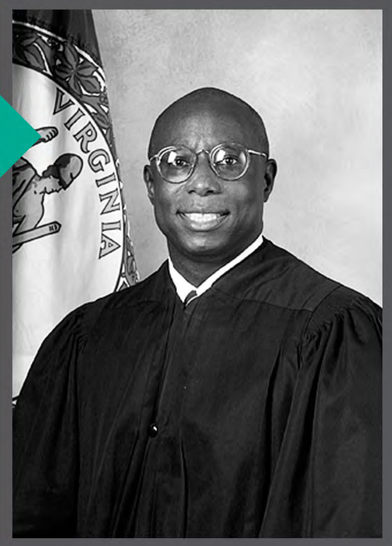
A respected lawyer and jurist, Leroy Rountree Hassell Sr. was the first African American to serve as chief justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia.



## *Melody C. Barnes*

1964–
Richmond
ATTORNEY AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

Fulfilling her passion for public service, Melody C. Barnes has been working to shape domestic policy in Washington, D.C., for more than 20 years.

## *Michael Robinson*

1983–
Richmond
FOOTBALL PLAYER AND YOUTH MENTOR

A success in the classroom and on the gridiron, Super Bowl champion Michael Robinson encourages students to strive academically and participate in community service.

# 2016 STRONG MEN & WOMEN IN VIRGINIA HISTORY

People of African descent have been a part of Virginia's—and America's—story since European colonization of the North American continent began. Yet the contributions of African Americans have often been ignored, obscured, or underappreciated by those who recorded history. In observance of Black History Month, the Library of Virginia and Dominion honor eight distinguished Virginians, past and present, as *Strong Men & Women in Virginia History* for their important contributions to the state, the nation, or their professions.

These men and women offer powerful examples of individuals who refused to be defined by their circumstances. Their biographies are a testament to the determination and perseverance displayed by extraordinary people during challenging times. These individuals demonstrate how African Americans have actively campaigned through education and advocacy for better lives for themselves, their people, and all Americans. It is these many contributions that the *Strong Men & Women in Virginia History* program seeks to recognize and share.

To learn more about these remarkable men and women, all of whom have used their talents and creativity to push for equality and inclusion in American society, visit our website:

**www.lva.virginia.gov/smw**

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