

Dangerfield Newby



Amaza Meredith



Oliver Hill



Edna Lewis



Evelyn Butts



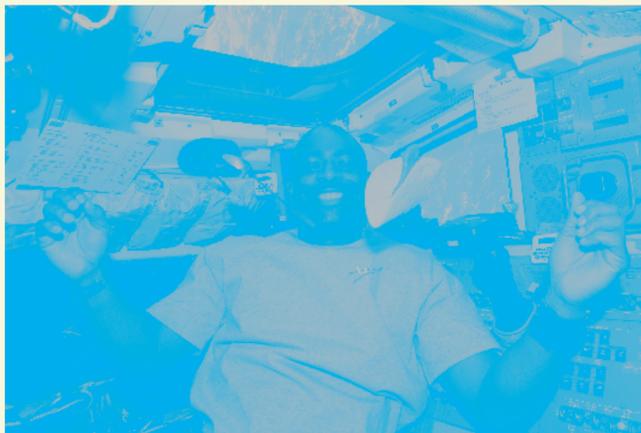
Claudia Whitworth



John Cephas



Leland Melvin



Dangerfield Newby (ca. 1820–1859), Culpeper County PARTICIPANT IN JOHN BROWN'S RAID
Dangerfield Newby was one of five African Americans who took up arms against slavery with fellow abolitionist John Brown at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859.

Amaza Lee Meredith (1895–1984), Lynchburg and Petersburg
ARTIST AND ARCHITECT
Amaza Lee Meredith broke through racial and gender barriers in architecture and artistic design.

Oliver White Hill (1907–2007), Richmond
ATTORNEY AND CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER
Oliver White Hill served as counsel in the groundbreaking *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954.

Edna Lewis (1916–2006), Orange County
CHEF AND AUTHOR
Edna Lewis created nationwide interest in southern cuisine and demonstrated that food could be more than just nourishment, but also a celebration of life.

Evelyn Thomas Butts (1924–1993), Norfolk
PRINCIPAL IN A CASE TO INVALIDATE THE POLL TAX
Evelyn Thomas Butts led a successful challenge of Virginia's poll tax all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

Claudia Alexander Whitworth (1927–), Roanoke
HUMANITARIAN, PHILANTHROPIST, AND EDITOR AND PUBLISHER OF THE *ROANOKE TRIBUNE*
Claudia Alexander Whitworth has worked diligently over the decades to improve the quality of life in Roanoke.

John Cephas (1930–), Caroline County
RENOWNED BLUES MUSICIAN
John Cephas has become a world ambassador representing the Virginia Piedmont Blues tradition.

Leland Devon Melvin (1964–), Lynchburg
ASTRONAUT
Leland D. Melvin inspires young people and encourages them to aspire to careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

2009

African American TRAILBLAZERS

in Virginia History



People of African descent have been a part of Virginia's—and America's—story since European colonization of the continent began. Yet the contributions of African Americans have often been ignored, obscured, or underappreciated by those who recorded history. In observance of African American History Month, the Library of Virginia is pleased to honor eight distinguished Virginians as African American Trailblazers for their contributions to the state and nation.

The men and women featured as Trailblazers 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. Through education, advocacy, entertainment, or armed rebellion, these individuals demonstrate how African Americans have actively campaigned for better lives for themselves and their people. It is these many contributions that the African American Trailblazers program seeks to share.

To learn more about these individuals and to explore educational resources about their lives, visit www.lva.virginia.gov.

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Dangerfield Newby

(ca. 1820–1859), Culpeper County
PARTICIPANT IN JOHN BROWN'S RAID

Dangerfield Newby (ca. 1820–1859) was born in Culpeper County, the oldest child of Henry Newby, a white man, and Elsey Newby, an enslaved black woman. In 1858, Henry Newby sold his land in Culpeper and moved with his family to Bridgeport, Ohio, thereby freeing his wife and their children. Shortly after moving to Bridgeport, Dangerfield Newby began raising money to buy his own wife and children, who were enslaved in Prince William County, Virginia. In the spring and summer of 1859 his wife wrote to him three times expressing concern that her owner would sell her before Newby was able to raise the money to free her. "Come this fall with out fail monny or no monny I want to see you so much," Harriet Newby wrote. "[I]t is said Master is in want of money[;] if so I know not what time he may sell me an[d] then all my bright hops of the futer are blasted."

Newby raised nearly \$742 toward the \$1,000 price that Harriet Newby's owner had set for her and one child, but he was unable to free his family. Shortly after learning of this disappointment, he joined John Brown in the planning for the raid on Harpers Ferry. During the raid, Newby shot and killed a grocer before he himself was shot and killed. His wife's letters were found on his body. In the 1890s his remains were moved from an unknown location to John Brown's Farm in North Elba, New York.

Evelyn Butts

(1924–1993), Norfolk
PRINCIPAL IN A CASE TO INVALIDATE
THE POLL TAX

Evelyn Thomas Butts (1924–1993), of Norfolk, took in boarders to support her three daughters after her husband was disabled during World War II. She was president of the Oakwood Civic League, which persuaded the city during the 1950s to construct a new middle school so that African American students would not have to ride the bus across town to a segregated school. An active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, she was a leader in the civil rights movement in Norfolk from the 1960s through the 1980s.



In November 1963 Butts filed the first suit in federal court challenging the constitutionality of the poll tax that Virginia imposed as a prerequisite to voter registration. Annie E. Harper and others from Fairfax County later filed a second suit, both of which reached the United States Supreme Court. Solicitor General Thurgood Marshall argued in support of Butts's assertions that the poll tax placed an unfair and unconstitutional financial burden on voter registration. On 24 March 1966 the Supreme Court ruled in the combined cases called *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections* that the poll tax was unconstitutional as Butts had originally stated. She then organized voter registration drives and founded the Concerned Citizens for Political Education. Butts was active in the Democratic Party, served for twelve years on the board of the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, and in 1982 became a member of the State Board of Housing and Community Development. In 1995, the City of Norfolk renamed a street in her honor.

Amaza Meredith

(1895–1984), Lynchburg and Petersburg
ARTIST AND ARCHITECT

Amaza Lee Meredith (1895–1984) was born in Lynchburg to Emma Kennedy Meredith, an African American, and Samuel Meredith, a white carpenter. Graduating in 1915 at the top of her high school class, Meredith received a certificate for teachers from Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute (later Virginia State University) and taught in Botetourt County and in Lynchburg's Dunbar High School. Between 1928 and 1934, she received a degree in teaching as well as a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in art education from Columbia University.

Hired in 1930 to teach art at Virginia State College for Negroes, Meredith became chair of the art department in 1935, a position she held until her retirement in 1958. She exhibited her artwork at galleries in Virginia, North Carolina, and New York. Meredith later focused her artistic vision on architecture and interior design. In 1938, she designed an International Style house at the eastern edge of the Virginia State campus. Azurest South was a five-room, single-story building featuring a strong geometric structure. In 1947, Meredith and her sister Maude Terry began Azurest North, a development of 120 lots for vacation homes for African Americans at Sag Harbor, Long Island.

Meredith died in January 1984. Azurest South became the home of the Virginia State University National Alumni Association in 1986, and in 1993 the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 2008 the Department of Historic Resources approved a highway historical marker for Meredith.



Oliver White Hill

(1907–2007), Richmond
ATTORNEY AND CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER

Oliver White Hill (1907–2007) was born in Richmond and began school in Roanoke but moved to Washington, D.C., to complete his education because there was no high school for African Americans in Roanoke. He graduated from the Howard University School of Law and became one of the most active and successful of Virginia's civil rights attorneys, filing and winning law suits against segregation and discrimination from before World War II until the end of the twentieth century. In 1951, students in Prince Edward County persuaded him to challenge mandatory racial segregation in the state's public schools. Hill served as counsel in the United States Supreme Court in the Virginia suit that was combined with others in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring mandatory racial segregation unconstitutional, even under the guise of separate-but-equal.

Hill was the most distinguished and successful of the many African American attorneys who achieved major breakthroughs in the civil rights movement in Virginia. In large part because of attorneys like Hill, the civil rights movement in Virginia was known for its many important legal victories rather than for violence and recrimination. In recognition of his contributions to the legal profession and the nation, President Bill Clinton awarded Hill the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1999. By the time that he died at age 100, Hill had become one of the most respected and revered Virginians of the twentieth century.



John Cephas

(1930–), Caroline County
RENOWNED BLUES MUSICIAN

John Cephas (1930–) was born in Washington D.C., to Sylvia Dudley Cephas and Ernest Cephas, a Baptist minister, and grew up in the Foggy Bottom area of Washington and in Caroline County, Virginia. He was influenced at an early age by his mother's singing, and his cousin David Talliaferro, a well-known Caroline County guitar player, helped him develop his playing in a style commonly referred to as East Coast or Piedmont Blues. This highly syncopated and danceable guitar technique is performed widely in Virginia and the Carolinas, and employs a thumb-bass, finger-picking approach. Before long, Cephas began performing at rural dance parties held in private homes.

Cephas also performed as a gospel singer with groups like the Capitol Harmonizers, developing a rich vocal style. He continued to work as a carpenter and fisherman before finally making music his full-time career. Cephas and harmonica master Phil Wiggins have made numerous successful recordings, earning the W. C. Handy Award as Blues Entertainers of the Year in 1987. In recent years Cephas has composed his own songs and created unique arrangements of tunes by Skip James and others.



John Cephas has performed all over the world, serving as an ambassador of this singular American art form. A founder of the Washington, D.C., Blues Society, he serves on the Executive Committee of the National Council for the Traditional Arts. Cephas received the coveted National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1989, an award recognizing master artists who preserve cultural legacies in music, dance, and crafts.

Edna Lewis

(1916–2006), Orange County
CHEF AND AUTHOR

Edna Lewis (1916–2006) was a chef and author who influenced culinary experts and brought admiration and dignity to southern foodways traditions. Lewis was born and raised in Freetown, an Orange County community that had been settled by emancipated African Americans in the Virginia Piedmont. As a child, she learned to appreciate food by watching her mother prepare meals and observing her family and neighbors grow their own vegetables, preserve their own fruits, and smoke their own meats. Because of this, Lewis advocated using fresh products without manufactured ingredients and preparing food in accordance with the season.



After the death of both parents, Lewis moved to New York and focused on her career in cooking. Her friends John Nicholson, an antiques dealer, and Karl Bissinger, a photographer, asked her to be the chef at a new restaurant. Together they opened Café Nicholson, which was an instant success and entertained individuals such as Tennessee Williams, Gloria Vanderbilt, and William Faulkner. Later she worked in restaurants in Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Carolinas.

With encouragement from her supporters, Lewis authored four books: *The Edna Lewis Cookbook* with Evangeline Peterson, 1972; *The Taste of Country Cooking*, 1976; *In Pursuit of Flavor* with Mary Goodbody, 1988; and *The Gift of Southern Cooking* with Scott Peacock, 2003. These books created nationwide interest in southern fare, and Lewis was honored with almost every award in the industry, from *Who's Who in American Cooking*, to the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Southern Foodways Alliance.

Image Credits: MEREDITH—This image shows the interior in Azurest South, designed by Meredith. Located on the campus of Virginia State University, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1993. Courtesy of the Virginia State University Archives; HILL—Courtesy of Oliver Hill family; LEWIS—Lewis received many awards for her cooking and her books, including the Grande Dame des Dames d'Escoffier International in 1999 and the James Beard Award for "Cookbook of the Year" in 2003. Courtesy of Edna Lewis family; BUTTS—Courtesy of *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*; WHITWORTH—courtesy of the *Roanoke Tribune*; CEPHAS—© Michael G. Stewart; MELVIN—Courtesy of NASA Johnson Space Center

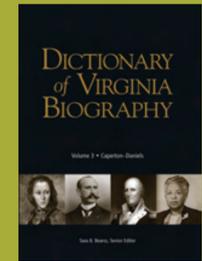
Leland Melvin

(1964–), Lynchburg
ASTRONAUT

Leland D. Melvin (1964–) was born in Lynchburg to Deems and Grace Melvin. After graduating from Hermitage High School there, he received a football scholarship to the University of Richmond where he studied chemistry. A standout on the field and in the classroom, he is a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Academic All-American and was inducted into the University of Richmond Athletic Hall of Fame. After college Melvin was recruited by both the Detroit Lions and the Dallas Cowboys but suffered injuries that prevented him from playing. Eventually, he started graduate school at the University of Virginia, studying materials science, and earned a masters' degree in 1991.

Melvin began working at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Langley Research Center in 1989. Nine years later he was admitted to the Astronaut Candidate training program. Melvin took his first space flight in February 2008, logging more than 306 hours and 5.3 million miles in space as he and the crew of the Space Shuttle *Atlantis* delivered a laboratory to the International Space Station. During the mission he operated the shuttle's robotic arm.

Melvin retains a wide variety of interests beyond his career. An avid photographer, he displays his work on his personal Web site. He also continues to enjoy sports including cycling, tennis, and snowboarding. As co-manager of NASA's Educator Astronaut Program, he travels nationwide, speaking to educators and students. Melvin believes that sports are an important part of education, and teaches students that teamwork extends into all aspects of work and life.



Learn more about African Americans in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1998–) and on the Library of Virginia's Web site at www.lva.virginia.gov/. Instructional materials, classroom activities, and nomination forms for the 2010 project are available at www.lva.virginia.gov/trailblazers/.

2009 African American TRAILBLAZERS in Virginia History



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