People of African descent have been a part of Virginia’s—and America’s—story since European settlement 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 their communities, state, and nation.

The men and women featured as Trailblazers in Virginia History offer powerful examples of individuals who refused to be defined by their circumstances. Their lives are a testament to the determination and perseverance displayed by extraordinary people during challenging times. It is these many contributions that the African American Trailblazers program seeks to share.

To learn more about these individuals, all of whom have used their unique talents and creativity to push for equality and inclusion in American society, visit our Web site at: www.lva.virginia.gov/trailblazers
Lucy Francis Simms
(born July 10, 1918), was born into slavery about 1877 and grew up in Virginia. In 1869, she was given a plantation by the Grey family. In 1877 she graduated from Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University). She returned to Rookwood and taught at her small county school in the African American community of Zona. A year later, she moved to the segregated school in Harrisburg. In 1883-1884 academic year, she was serving as acting principal of the Effingham School, where she was awarded and used for research.

Dedicated to her profession, Simms attended teacher training programs and participated in the activities of the National Teachers’ Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. She received numerous honors from educational and public schools for African Americans. Over the course of her eighty-six-year career, Simms taught at an estimated 8,000 schools and had a profound influence on the lives of many African Americans.

The City of Harrisburg recognized her accomplishments when it opened the Lucy F. Simms School in 1999. The public school of Rookwood, Harrisburg and Rookwood County honored her outstanding teachers with the annual Lucy F. Simms Education Continuing Education Course continues to operate in the 1939 school building at Harrisburg.

Newsworthy by Devon Finley (2009-2010), Skyline Middle School, Harrisonburg

Robert Walter Johnson
(1899-1957), Lynchburg

Robert Walter Johnson, a physician and tennis coach, was born in Kingsville, Prince Edward County, and grew up in Virginia's Jim Crow South. Johnson was the first African American to receive his medical degree from the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. His perseverance and advocacy opened the door for other African Americans to pursue medical careers.

His contributions to the advancement of African American education were also significant. Johnson founded the Junior Development Program of the American Tennis Association, a program that provided funding for minority coaches and allowing African American tennis players to train and compete at the highest level. Johnson mentored several successful professional tennis players, including Arthur Ashe, Althea Gibson, and John Johnson, the first two African American Grand Slam champions.

In 1959, Johnson was inducted into the Hall of Fame, becoming the first African American to be honored in that way. Johnson continued to work in education and public service until his death in 1957.

Newsworthy by Devona Faye (2009-2010), Foye Senior High School, Richmond

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