

## 2009 African American Trailblazers in Virginia History

Lesson Suggestions—Evelyn Butts Thomas

### LESSON TITLE:

“The Right to Vote is Too Precious ... to be so Burdened or Conditioned”: Evelyn Thomas Butts and the Fight Against Virginia’s Poll Tax

### VIRGINIA SOL CORRELATIONS:

VS.8(a, b), USI.10(b), USII.8(a), CE.3(b, d), CE.5(e), CE.8(b), VUS.8(c), VUS.13(a, b), VUS.14(a)

### INTRODUCTION:

Evelyn Butts—a wife, mother, and seamstress—became a political activist who helped break down one of the barriers that kept African Americans from participating in the democratic process. Using Butts’s biography and the supplemental documents provided, discuss with your students the history of the poll tax in Virginia, the battle to overturn it, and other obstacles to the right to vote during the civil rights movement.

*Primary sources available from the 2009 African American Trailblazers in Virginia History Web site:*

- Biography of Evelyn Thomas Butts
- Excerpts from *Harper et al. v. Virginia Board of Elections et al.*, 14 March 1966.
- “Victor Expects Another Fight,” *Virginian-Pilot*, 25 March 1966.
- “Death of the Poll Tax,” *Virginian-Pilot*, 25 March 1966.

### HISTORY:

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

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 et al. v. Virginia State Board of Elections et al.* 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, a group that in 1969 helped elect the first African American member of the General Assembly from Norfolk in the twentieth century. Butts was also active in the Democratic Party, served for twelve years on the board of the Norfolk Redevelopment and

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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.

### ACTIVITIES:

**History of Voting Rights in the United States:** Evelyn Butts is remembered for challenging the poll tax in Virginia. The poll tax was but one of many mechanisms used in the 19th and 20th centuries to deprive African Americans and other minority groups of the right to vote. In order to put Butts's 1966 victory in historical perspective, ask students to conduct research on the timeline of laws, U.S. Supreme Court decisions, and federal legislation that have helped ensure and protect the right to vote for all citizens.

**Interpreting the *Harper* Decision:** Have students read and analyze the *Harper* decision written by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. What is the basis of the court's decision? What constitutional amendment does the decision reference and why? What other legal challenges during the civil rights movement focus on this same amendment?

**“What do you stand for?”:** Evelyn Butts was an ordinary American who took a stand on her constitutional rights and helped to win a case that changed political life in Virginia and America for years to come. Working in groups, have students identify some contemporary issue that they would like to see addressed. Students should thoroughly research the topic they choose. Who is effected by the issue? Who has the power to address the issue? What strategies could they use to give voice to their concern and to motivate others to join them? Using these questions, have students develop a campaign for action around their issue. Allow groups to present their action plans and vote on which is the most compelling.

### SUGGESTED READING AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Lewis, Earl. *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Tarter, Brent. “Butts, Evelyn Thomas.” In *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*. Edited by John T. Kneebone et al., 2:449–450. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1998– .

Virginia Historical Society. “Becoming Equal.” <http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/equal.htm> (accessed January 23, 2009).

Wallenstein, Peter. *Blue Laws and Black Codes: Conflict, Courts, and Change in Twentieth-century Virginia*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004.