

POLITICS

Recognition of Virginia civil rights figures Barbara Johns, Reuben Lawson advances in Washington

The proposed model of Johns for the U.S. Capitol wins first-round approval. U.S. Senate votes to rename federal courthouse in Roanoke after Lawson.

by **Cardinal Staff**
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A close-up of the Barbara Johns model. Courtesy of Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

Recognition of civil rights figures from Prince Edward County and Roanoke advanced Wednesday in separate actions in Washington.

The Commission on Historical Statues in the U.S. Capitol has approved the model of the statue of Barbara Rose Johns, the teenager who led a walk-out from a segregated school in Prince Edward County in 1951, that will replace the state's statue of Robert E. Lee.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Senate unanimously approved legislation to rename the federal courthouse in Roanoke after the late civil rights lawyer Reuben Lawson, although the measure faces an uncertain future in the House.

Barbara Johns



The Barbara Johns model. Courtesy of Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

The commission's decision paves the way for the state to seek approval of the model, created by sculptor Steven Weitzman, from the Architect of the Capitol, according to a news release announcing the initial approval.

The Johns statue will depict the civil rights activist at age 16, when she led a student strike for equal education at Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville.

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A foundry in Pennsylvania will begin the work to cast the bronze statue of Johns for display in the National Statuary Hall after the Architect of the Capitol approves the model, the release said.

Each state contributes two statues to the National Statuary Hall. The Johns statue will join a sculpture of George Washington as the second part of Virginia's contribution to the collection. Weitzman's work is replacing a sculpture of Lee that was removed in 2020.

[Read more about the Johns statue: [Sculptor seeks to give a young civil rights pioneer her due, more than 70 years later.](#)]

Reuben Lawson



Reuben Lawson. Courtesy of John Fishwick.

Lawson was an attorney in Roanoke in the 1950s and '60s who figured in the lawsuits that integrated no fewer than six school districts in that part of the state.

Lawson filed the first desegregation lawsuit in Southwest Virginia, in Pulaski County. He went on to go to court in Floyd County, Grayson County, Lynchburg, Roanoke and Roanoke County to force the school systems to integrate — and eventually won them all.

He also figured in a case of national importance. In 1961, the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Baltimore Colts played a preseason game in Roanoke's Victory Stadium (at a time when there were no NFL teams between Washington and Dallas, so the league often played preseason games in the South). Virginia law at the time required that seating be segregated. The Roanoke NAACP, which Lawson represented, filed suit but it sat in court, unheard.

With the game approaching, the NAACP tried another tack: It sent telegrams to all the Black players and asked them to boycott the game if Victory Stadium wasn't integrated. That precipitated a crisis that went all the way to the NFL's new commissioner, Pete Rozelle. The resolution: Roanoke agreed to look the other way and ignore state law, and the NFL never again played before a segregated crowd.

Former U.S. Attorney John Fishwick of Roanoke [proposed in 2022](#) that the Richard H. Poff Federal Building be renamed after Lawson. In December, U.S. Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, both D-Virginia, [introduced legislation](#) to make that happen.

Poff, for whom the courthouse is currently named, was a Republican congressman from Radford who later served on the Virginia Supreme Court. Warner and Kaine noted that Poff "opposed integration and voted against the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, 1964 and 1968 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965."

In a statement Wednesday, the senators said: "We are thrilled that our legislation to honor Reuben Lawson's immense contributions to the civil rights movement and Roanoke community was passed unanimously by the Senate. Mr. Lawson dedicated his life to fighting against segregation, and we urge the House of Representatives to pass this bill to help ensure that his tireless pursuit of justice is remembered across the Commonwealth for generations to come."

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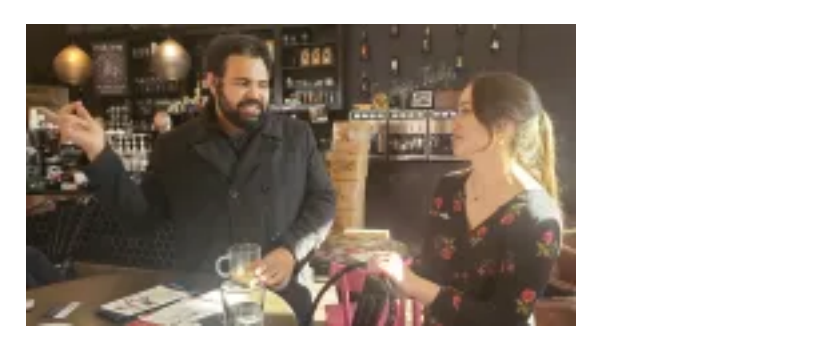
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