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 and advocacy, 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, 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

**2010 African American Trailblazers in Virginia History**

**Mary Peake** (1620–1651), Williamsburg
Baptist Leader

Mary Peake was born enslaved, but persevered to become a well-known preacher, gain his freedom, and establish a Baptist church in Williamsburg that continues as an active congregation today.

**Dorothy Bigelow Hamm** (1919–2004), Caroline and Arlington Counties
Civil Rights and Community Activist

Through legal and political actions, civil rights activist Dorothy Bigelow Hamm fought for African American equality.

**Dorothy Hamm** (ca. 1750–1807 or 1808), Williamsburg
Baptist Leader

Henry Marsh, III was born enslaved, but persevered to become a well-known preacher, gain his freedom, and establish a Baptist church in Williamsburg that continues as an active congregation today.

**Florence Saunders Farley** (1928– ), Roanoke and Petersburg
Psychologist, Educator, Elected Official, Artist

Florence Saunders Farley has fought against racism and bias to open doors in science and politics for African American women in Virginia.

**Henry L. Marsh, III** (1933– ), Richmond
Civil Rights Attorney and Elected Official

Throughout his law career and the public offices he has held, Henry L. Marsh has committed his life to bringing equal rights and opportunities to African Americans.

**Christopher Bernard Howard** (1969– ), Hampden-Sydney
24th President of Hampden-Sydney College

Christopher Bernard Howard sets an example for Hampden-Sydney students—and for everyone—through his impressive résumé of service to the country and youth-enrichment efforts in Africa and the United States.

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Mary Peake

Born in 1928, Rosemarie and Peter Peck, Brooklyn, New York. They have been active in the arts, especially as curators and historians, and are well known for their work in promoting the careers of previously marginalized artists. Peck has been a curator at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., and is currently the director of the American Federation of Arts, a leading organization that promotes the arts through traveling exhibitions and other programs.

Sara Bagby

Joseph Thomas Newsome

Christopher Howard

Florence Farley

Henry Marsh, III

Dorothy Ham

Mary Smith Kelso Peake (1825-1862) was born in Newburg, the daughter of a free black woman and a prominent Englishman. When she was six, Mary was sent to live with her aunt and uncle to attend a school for African Americans in Alexandria, which was then a part of the District of Columbia. During her schooling, she probably learned mathematics, reading, writing, and sewing skills. Peake returned to Norfolk in 1849.

In 1857 Peake moved with her family to Hampton. While supporting herself as a seamstress, she began attending Hampton Normal and Savings Institution, which was founded in 1865. Peake was a dedicated instructor, creating a school for adults in the evenings and continuing to teach despite falling health. Her teaching methods were widely imitated in other schools.

Peake was a skilled seamstress, sewing clothes for schools and organizations. In 1859, she was elected to the Virginia State Convention, and in 1861, she was appointed to the Hampton Normal and Savings Institution's board of directors. Peake was the first woman elected to an official position in the state of Virginia, and she served as an officer and director of the school for several years.

After the Civil War, the school that Peake founded continued to flourish, and she was appointed to the board of trustees. Peake was a strong advocate for education for African Americans, and she worked tirelessly to ensure that students received a quality education. She was also a strong supporter of the abolitionist movement, and she spoke out against slavery and segregation.

Peake died in 1887, and her legacy lives on through the work of the Hampton Normal and Savings Institution, which has educated thousands of African American students since its founding.

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