

2024 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History

PRESENTED BY

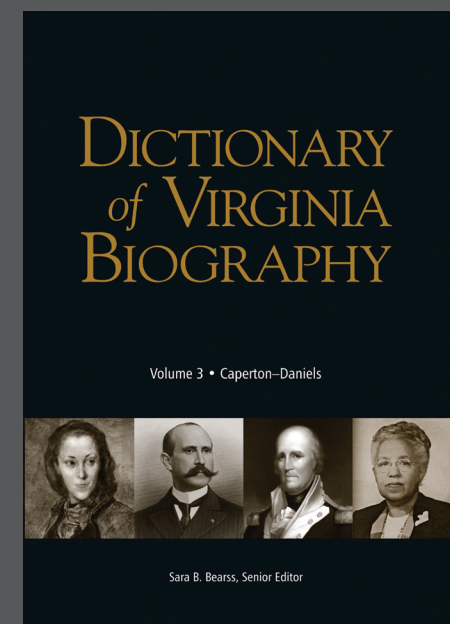


WWW.LVA.VIRGINIA.GOV/SMW

People of African descent have been a part of Virginia's — and America's — story since colonization of the North American continent began. Yet the contributions of African Americans have often been ignored or obscured and until more recently did not receive the attention and esteem they are due. Dominion Energy and the Library of Virginia honor distinguished Virginians as ***Strong Men & Women in Virginia History*** for their important contributions to the state, the nation, or their professions.

These men and women 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 and demonstrate how African Americans have campaigned through education and advocacy for better lives for themselves, their people, and all Americans. It is these many contributions that the ***Strong Men & Women in Virginia History*** program seeks to recognize and share.

To learn more about the remarkable honorees, all of whom have used their talents and creativity to push for equality and inclusion in American society, visit our website at <http://edu.lva.virginia.gov/strong-men-women-in-virginia-history>.



Learn more about distinguished African Americans from Virginia in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1998–2006) and on the Library of Virginia's websites, www.lva.virginia.gov and www.virginiamemory.com. Instructional materials and 2025 nomination forms are available at <http://edu.lva.virginia.gov/strong-men-women-in-virginia-history>.

A joint project of Dominion Energy and the Library of Virginia.



LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA

800 East Broad Street • Richmond VA 23219
www.lva.virginia.gov

Dr. Erma L. Freeman

1946– | Mecklenburg County
DENTIST

Dr. Erma L. Freeman was a passionate student growing up in Mecklenburg County, where she learned the value of taking pride in the quality of her work from her parents and her teachers. After graduating from St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville and earning a master's degree in biology at Virginia State College (now Virginia State University) in 1969, she taught school in Lynchburg for four years. With an interest in health care, she enrolled at the Medical College of Virginia (now Virginia Commonwealth University School of Dentistry) to study dentistry. She was one of fewer than 10 women and fewer than 10 African Americans in the program of over 400 students, and in 1977 she became the first Black woman to earn a Doctor of Dental Surgery degree from the college.

Dr. Freeman operated her own practice near Petersburg for 20 years before working as a dentist for the Virginia Department of Corrections. Throughout her career she stressed the importance of good dental care to her patients' overall physical and mental health. In 1993, Freeman was the first Black woman dentist appointed to the Virginia Board of Dentistry, and in 1994 she was the second Black woman to serve as president of the Old Dominion Dental Society. Since retiring, she has continued to educate communities in Mecklenburg and southern Virginia about dental hygiene and provided pediatric dental exams with the Colgate Dental Van. By engaging with children in minority communities, she hopes to inspire young people to believe they can achieve their goals regardless of their backgrounds and to not be limited by circumstances. In 2019 the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Dentistry honored Freeman with its First 100 Dentists of Color Trailblazer Award.

Nominated by Sherri Bagley, Lawrenceville.

R. Tyrone Foster

1958– | Bristol
SHERIFF

Bristol native R. Tyrone Foster grew up in public housing, where he was inspired by his hardworking father, who encouraged his children to strive for their goals. He worked for the Electrolux Corporation for 24 years before graduating from the Southwest Virginia Criminal Justice Training Academy. Foster joined the Bristol police department and during more than two decades he worked as a patrolman and a detective, while also serving as a hostage/crisis negotiator, gang investigator, field training officer, and member of the adult drug treatment court. Dedicated to serving and improving his community, Foster officiated Virginia High School League basketball games for nearly 20 years; coached little league football, basketball, and baseball; volunteered at the Boys Club of Bristol; and served as a member of the executive board of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes serving southwestern Virginia and eastern Tennessee. He has also served on the board of Bristol Baseball Inc., which operates the city's minor-league baseball team.

Foster became the first African-American member of the Bristol School Board in 2008, where he was a strong advocate for students and worked to increase diversity among the teaching staff. He sat as president of the Virginia School Boards Association and earned the organization's Award of Distinction. Elected the first African-American sheriff of Bristol in November 2021, Foster has worked with the city's police and fire chiefs, commonwealth's attorney, and school officials to enhance community awareness, and partnered with community agencies to curb recidivism by fighting drug abuse and addressing mental health challenges.

Gregory L. Robinson

1960– | Manassas
NASA PROJECT DIRECTOR

Gregory L. Robinson experienced the challenges of desegregation in his Pittsylvania County schools, where he was also encouraged by dedicated and supportive teachers to further his love of math and science. With a football scholarship to Virginia Union University, he earned a degree in math along with a dual degree in electrical engineering at Howard University in 1983. Inspired by the experiences of several classmates, Robinson later joined the staff of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). He held various leadership positions at Goddard Space Flight Center, Glenn Research Center, and at NASA headquarters in the Science Mission Directorate. He has helped develop satellites to study the sun and systems for the space shuttle program and for missions to Mars.

In 2018, NASA named Robinson director for the James Webb Space Telescope Program. A massive undertaking that included international teams of more than 10,000 scientists, engineers, and others, the telescope project faced technical difficulties and was behind schedule and over budget. Robinson's leadership enabled the completion of NASA's most complex space science observatory with the launch in December 2021 of the Webb telescope. This immensely powerful telescope has provided stunning data and discoveries about our solar system, the formation of stars and planets, and the evolution of galaxies in ways that have never before been possible. Robinson retired to his home in Manassas in July 2022, but continues to share his leadership strategies as a lecturer at Columbia University. Throughout his career Robinson has received numerous honors, including being named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People of 2022.

Nominated by Tony R. King, Prince George County

Captain Janet H. Days

1969– | Norfolk
NAVY COMMANDING OFFICER

Chicago native Captain Janet H. Days graduated from Old Dominion University in 1999 with a Bachelor of Science degree in business and received her commission through Naval ROTC via the Enlisted Commissioning Program. She completed her command tour aboard the USS *McFaul*, deploying independently to the U.S. 5th and 6th Fleet areas of responsibility (AOR) in the Atlantic Ocean and the Middle East. Days has served on five Navy combatants (warships) and multiple shore assignments, including a deployment to Kabul, Afghanistan, as the Joint Staff, J7 liaison officer to the Internal Security Assistance Force headquarters. Her personal awards include the Legion of Merit, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Meritorious Service Medal, Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal (seven awards), Army Commendation Medal (two awards), Army Achievement Medal, and Afghanistan Campaign Medal.

In February 2023, Captain Days became the 51st commanding officer of Naval Station Norfolk, the world's largest naval complex and home to dozens of ships and tens of thousands of military personnel. The first African American to hold this post, she had also made history in 2021 when she was the first African American appointed as the station's executive officer. With her father's years of service in the United States Army as an example, Days emphasizes hard work, professional curiosity, and attention to detail, while embracing her historic command as inspiration for not just African-American women, but all women, to make their own opportunities as they seek careers in any field.



Dr. Erma L. Freeman

1946– | Mecklenburg County
DENTIST

The first Black woman to earn a dental degree from Virginia Commonwealth University, Dr. Erma L. Freeman strives to increase diversity in the dental profession.



R. Tyrone Foster

1958– | Bristol
SHERIFF

In a lifetime of dedicated service to the Bristol community, Sheriff Tyrone Foster has worked to ensure the safety and protection of all citizens.



Gregory L. Robinson

1960– | Manassas
NASA PROJECT DIRECTOR

Gregory L. Robinson oversaw the completion and launch of NASA's transformational James Webb Space Telescope.



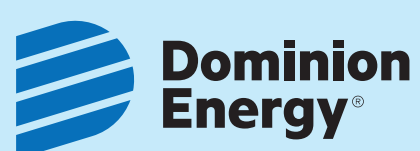
Captain Janet H. Days

1969– | Norfolk
NAVY COMMANDING OFFICER

With decades of meritorious service in the United States Navy, Captain Janet H. Days is the first African American to command Naval Station Norfolk, the world's largest naval station.

2024 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History

PRESENTED BY



WWW.LVA.VIRGINIA.GOV/SMW

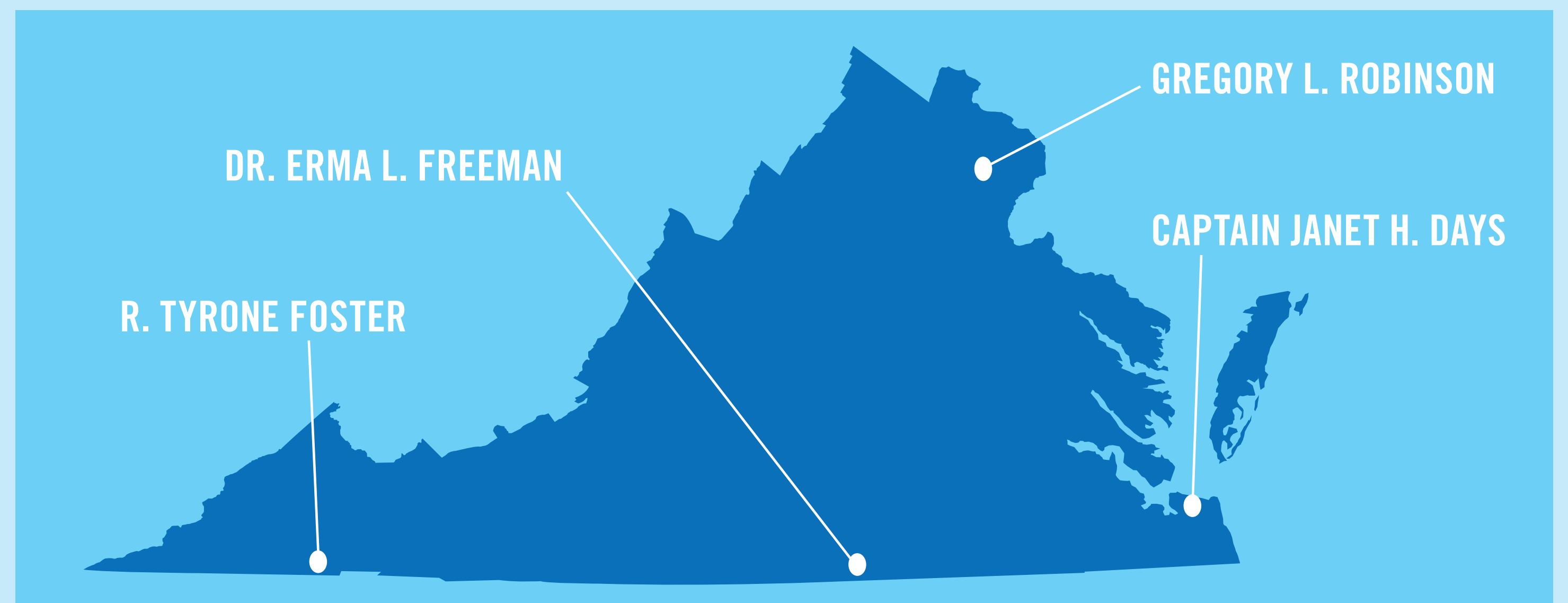


Photo Credits: Days, courtesy of the U.S. Navy. Foster, courtesy of Michael Sanders. Freeman, courtesy of Krystal Pearson. Robinson, courtesy of NASA.