The Oliver Hill Story
by Bruce Craig Miller

School integration. Barnard School, Washington, D.C.
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“...We all went to sleep at night and got up in the morning and put our pants on one leg at a time. We all chewed our food before swallowing. We all had brains to think and hearts to feel. We all loved. And we all hated. Even me. When you got right down to it, we were, all of us, pretty much the same.”

- Oliver Hill

In The Oliver Hill Story, learn about important actions of Mr. Hill and others that impacted and advanced the Civil Rights Movement in America. As the play points out, when so much emphasis is put on Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, and on the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it is easy to forget that the struggle for equality under the law was lengthy - a journey that sometimes felt like “one step forward and two steps back.”

In the play, Hill’s law office receives a phone call from a young lady named Barbara Johns. She needs his help because she has just led over 400 students on a strike of their school. It is 1951 and the doctrine of “separate but equal” rules the land. Johns and her classmates have had enough, and want the world to know about the deplorable (and certainly not equal) conditions at their school. Hill takes her case, which becomes one of the five cases to be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court; these five cases were heard together and are known as Brown v. Board of Education. The Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal was discriminatory and thus began the process of integrating our nation’s schools - but not before the Massive Resistance movement shut down education systems in Johns’ area and in many others throughout the South.
“It’s as if President Lincoln freed the slaves and then Dr. King immediately came charging up to lead the marches and protests and sit-ins that helped black men and women claim a few of our basic human rights.”

- from *The Oliver Hill Story*

Each of the events on these pages was significant to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Put them in order. **Bonus:** Add a date to each.

- Emancipation Proclamation frees slaves in Confederate States
- Martin Luther King Jr.’s Montgomery Bus Boycott
- Barbara Johns leads student strike in Prince Edward County, VA
- U.S. Supreme Court decides the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*
Fighting for Equality (2)

As the play says, “One step forward, two steps back (or sometimes ten!).” While each of the events below is important to the Civil Rights Movement, some of them served to hinder the quest for equality. Which of these events marked a step backwards for African American rights? Circle those. Of the others, which do you think marked the most significant step forward in the rights movement? Be prepared to defend your choice with three reasons.

The 13th Amendment abolishes slavery in all states

Civil Rights Act, known as the Ku Klux Klan Act, is passed

The 14th Amendment awards citizenship to African Americans

U.S. Supreme Court decides the case of Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, KS
Review the image of the *Brown Decision* below and the excerpt from the decision to the left. Answer the following:

1. When was the decision written? Whose signature is on it? _______________________________________________

2. What does this tell you about life in America at that time? _______________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________

3. How did life in America change after the *Brown Decision*? What Decision was overturned by the *Brown Decision*? _______________________________________________________________________________________

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**The Brown Decision:**

“On consideration whereof, It is ordered and adjudged by this Court that the judgment of the said District Court in this case be, and the same is hereby reversed with costs; and that this cause be, and the same is hereby, remanded to the said District Court to take such proceedings and enter such orders and decrees consistent with the opinions of this Court as are necessary and proper to admit to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed the parties to this case.”

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**Supreme Court of the United States**

No. 1 —— , October Term, 1954

Oliver Brown, Mrs. Richard Loving, Mrs. Sadie Edmonson et al.,
Appeals,

vs.

Board of Education of Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas, et al.

Appeal from the United States District Court for the District of Kansas.

This case was brought on the transcript of the record from the United States District Court for the District of Kansas, and was argued by counsel.

On consideration whereof, It is ordered and adjudged by this Court that the judgment of the said District Court in this case be, and the same is hereby reversed with costs; and that this cause be, and the same is hereby, remanded to the said District Court to take such proceedings and enter such orders and decrees consistent with the opinions of this Court as are necessary and proper to admit to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed the parties to this case.

Per Mr. Chief Justice Warren,

May 31, 1954.

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**Bonus:** The Brown case was actually a combination of five separate cases. What were they?
On Thursday, December 15, 2011, the Robert Russa Moton Museum honored Sheriff Harris on the occasion of his retirement. In recognition of the impact the Prince Edward County school closings at the time of Massive Resistance in Virginia had upon Sheriff Harris' life, Moton Director Lacy Ward, Jr. presented the following resolution:

**A Resolution in Recognition of Sheriff Travis D. Harris, Jr.'s Service to Prince Edward County, Virginia**

*Whereas:* Sheriff Travis D. Harris, Jr.'s life experiences are represented through the Robert Russa Moton Museum's mission "to preserve and positively interpret the history of civil rights in education, specifically as it relates to Prince Edward County and the role its citizens played in America's struggle to move from a segregated to an integrated society," and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris, a county native, began his education in the Prince Edward County Public Schools; an education interrupted by the 1959-64 school closings, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris along with more than 4,000 others of his generation; some receiving no formal schooling, some receiving a private education, some leaving home for an education, suffered the prolonged loss of locally supported public schools, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris returned to the classroom in 1963 with the opening of the Prince Edward County "Free Schools" graduating from R. R. Moton High School in 1968, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris served honorably in the United States Army, capably with the Virginia Division of Capitol Police, and faithfully with the Prince Edward County Sheriff's Office, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris was elected Sheriff of Prince Edward County in 1999, and was subsequently re-elected in 2003 and 2007, serving county citizens as their chief law enforcement officer for 12 years, and

*Whereas:* the life experiences of Sheriff Harris portray the life of one who overcame the adversities placed before him in his youth and participated not only in the desegregation of the county's public schools, but also led the desegregation of the ranks of county constitutional officers, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris along with more than 4,000 others of his generation; some receiving no formal schooling, some receiving a private education, some leaving home for an education, suffered the prolonged loss of locally supported public schools, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris returned to the classroom in 1963 with the opening of the Prince Edward County "Free Schools" graduating from R. R. Moton High School in 1968, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris served honorably in the United States Army, capably with the Virginia Division of Capitol Police, and faithfully with the Prince Edward County Sheriff's Office, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris was elected Sheriff of Prince Edward County in 1999, and was subsequently re-elected in 2003 and 2007, serving county citizens as their chief law enforcement officer for 12 years, and

*Whereas:* the life experiences of Sheriff Harris portray the life of one who overcame the adversities placed before him in his youth and participated not only in the desegregation of the county's public schools, but also led the desegregation of the ranks of county constitutional officers, and

*Whereas:* Sheriff Harris by personal example contributed to community reconciliation in the aftermath of the county's Civil Rights struggle.

*Therefore, Be it Resolved:* that the Robert Russa Moton Museum with fond admiration recognizes and celebrates the service of Sheriff Travis D. Harris, Jr. to Prince Edward County, and

*Be it Further Resolved:* that a copy of this resolution be presented to Sheriff Harris and that a copy be placed in the permanent record of the Museum.

Signed this Fifteenth day of December, in the Year of our Lord Two Thousand Eleven.

/s/ Robert L. Hamlin  
President

/s/ Lacy Ward, Jr.  
Director

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**Analyzing Primary Sources - answer the following on a separate sheet of paper:**

1. What “prolonged loss” did Sheriff Harris suffer in the early sixties? Explain.
2. Why do you think Sheriff Harris’ career and life was recognized and celebrated by the Robert Russa Moton Museum?
3. Explain how Sheriff Harris was one “who overcame the adversities placed before him.” Give examples.

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*Resolution reprinted with permission from The Robert Russa Moton Museum. a Civil Rights Museum housed in the former R. R. Moton High School. Moton is committed to the preservation and positive interpretation of the history of civil rights in education, specifically as it relates to Prince Edward County and the role its citizens played in America’s struggle to move from a segregated to an integrated society. Find out more at www.motonmuseum.org.*
Read the following passage from the script of *The Oliver Hill Story*. Highlight details from Barbara Johns’ description that demonstrate that her school was inferior to the white schools in Prince Edward County.

“We get dressed every morning, Mr. Hill, in our skirts and blouses, the boys in their coats and ties, because we are serious about our education. But when we get off the school bus, we walk through mud into tar paper shacks that they’ve built to handle all the overcrowding. They look like chicken coops on our farm, set up on cinder blocks with cold air comin’ in through the floor. In each shack there’s an old oil barrel in the corner with a wood fire meant to provide some heat. But in the winter, Mr. Hill, unless you’re right next to that fire, you freeze. We have to wear our coats and our gloves all during class. And when it rains, the roof is more holes than roof, and so we open up our umbrellas inside and hold them over our chairs—we have no desks in these coops, Mr. Hill—we hold up our umbrellas so that our notebooks won’t get soaking wet.”
The Oliver Hill Story
by Bruce Craig Miller

Theatre IV Presents...

Theatre IV...
Bruce C. Miller,
Artistic Director

Phil Whiteway,
Managing Director

Classroom Connections
Study Guide written by
Heather Widener, MAT
Widener Consulting LLC

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Words to Know

**Playwright:** (n.) a person who writes a play

**Play:** (n.) a story acted out with dialogue

**Adapted:** (v.) changed to fit a new use or situation

**Musical:** (n.) a play that includes songs

**Dialogue:** (n.) words spoken by the characters in a play

**Lyrics:** (n.) words of a song

Using the list above, fill in the word:

A _______that uses music is called a ______________. Actors in a play speak words called __________ and sing __________ of a song.

The person who writes a play is called a _____________.

Often, a play is ____________ from another source.