

2020

HAMPTON
HEROES

HAMPTON VA

INTRO

The Martin Luther King Jr. and Hampton Heroes Memorial Plaza pays tribute to the national civil rights leader, as well as to people who worked for civil rights and social justice in Hampton. This is a living monument, and new chapters will be added. These are among the most influential individuals documented during these pivotal times in Hampton's history.



2020 HAMPTON HEROES

MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATES

Richard M. Bagley
Rufus B. Easter
Evelyn W. Easter
Harriet Nachman Storm

MODERN-ERA FIRSTS

Dr. Mary T. Christian
William Mason Cooper
James L. Eason
Juanita F. Gupton
Ann Hitch Kilgore
John M. Phillips Sr.
Wilford Taylor Jr.
George E. Wallace
Yarborough B. Williams

MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATES

For centuries, people with mental illness had been hidden away, feared by many. Early asylums were often focused more on removing people with psychological disorders from society, not treating them. Early treatments were often experimental and dangerous. When public funding was made available, institutions became more humane, but still places of little hope where people lived out their lives. Medications were developed that offered effective treatment. These reformers advocated for legal changes, resources and funding for community-based treatments.



Richard M. Bagley

Richard Marshall Bagley Sr., known as "Dick," represented Hampton for 20 years in the Virginia House of Delegates. He headed a legislative panel that studied mental health services in Virginia in the early 1970s. The group became known as the Bagley Commission, and its recommendations led to changes that transformed how the mentally ill are treated. Ultimately, mental health programs were substantially strengthened. The initial framework for community services for the mentally ill was established through his innovative and effective advocacy and leadership. Bagley, a Hampton native, was involved in many other political and civic activities on the local and state level, including serving as Virginia's first secretary of economic development.



Rufus B. and Evelyn W. Easter

Husband-and-wife team Evelyn W. Easter and Rufus B. Easter Jr. began advocating for mental health awareness in the 1970s. Evelyn was instrumental in establishing a branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness for Hampton and Newport News. In 1987, Rufus helped create Insight Enterprises Inc. and the Peninsula Center for Independent Living to serve people with disabilities. He also served on the boards of Eastern State Hospital, the Hampton Drug Court and the Virginia Disabilities Board. He is also active in the arts and humanities. He founded the Hampton Association for the Arts and Humanities, which oversaw the creation of the American Theater, helped secure grants that funded archaeological excavations in Downtown Hampton and was a member of the Steering Committee for the Hampton History Museum. Evelyn Easter died in 2017 after decades of civic engagement.



Harriet Nachman Storm

Harriet Nachman Storm was a strong advocate for people affected by mental disabilities. She lived in Newport News and Hampton throughout her life, and in 1979 she was appointed to the Hampton-Newport News Community Services Board. She was on the board for an unprecedented 23 years – including two terms as chairwoman. In addition to many other civic associations, Storm was a member of the State Board of the Mental Health Association and the State Alliance for Increased Mental Health Awareness. She also was on the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities. For over three decades, her statewide leadership was instrumental in many of the positive changes in mental health funding and policy. Storm died in 2009.

MODERN-ERA TRAILBLAZERS IN PUBLIC SERVICE

The Reconstruction Era changed who was eligible to represent citizens in public office. Black men, who previously had not been able to vote, were elected or appointed to public office in Hampton and throughout the South. That time period was brief, however, as laws were enacted to keep African-Americans from voting. Women got the right to vote in 1920. However, it was really after the civil rights and women's rights movements in the 1960s that these traditionally underrepresented groups began to truly break through the glass ceilings. These remarkable trailblazers also helped change laws and minds, enabling a path for others to follow. Trails can be blazed in other ways – ensuring that the voters can select a mayor and hiring a diverse staff and promoting diversity.

Today's honorees do not complete this category. There will be others to honor in the future, and we will continue to add their names. Additional trailblazers are even here today, and we look forward to honoring them after they leave public service. Also, other underrepresented segments of the population will continue to blaze paths for others to follow.



Dr. Mary T. Christian

Mary Taylor Christian was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1968 and became the first African-American since Reconstruction to represent the 92nd District. She served seven terms and championed legislation on education, healthcare and prescription drugs. Born on Aug. 9, 1924, in Hampton, Christian was a graduate of Phenix High School. She earned her bachelor's degree in education from Hampton Institute in 1955, and for the next five years was a teacher at Hampton City Schools, attending Columbia University in the summers to earn her master's degree. In 1968 she earned her Ph.D from Michigan State University. Christian retired as professor emeritus at Hampton University after serving as a professor and dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Education. She was the recipient of numerous awards for community and humanitarian service. She is already a Hampton Hero for her work in integrating public schools. She died in 2019.



William Mason Cooper

William Mason Cooper was the first African-American on the Hampton School Board and played a vital role in the process of integrating the schools. Cooper was a native of Hampton, attended Hampton Institute and received his bachelor's and master's degrees at Columbia University. He held a variety of education positions in North Carolina, including dean of instruction at Elizabeth City Teachers College. A specialist in adult education, Cooper was the director of extension at Hampton Institute as well as director of summer school, research and public relations, and professor of education and registrar from 1929–1950. He was also a faculty member of Virginia State College in Norfolk, and held leadership positions in many national organizations, including the Virginia Society for Research, the Virginia Interracial Commission, American Teachers Association and Conference on Adult Education. He is already a Hampton Hero for his work in integrating public schools.



James L. Eason

James L. "Jimmy" Eason was the first person to be elected mayor of Hampton by all the citizens, not selected by City Council, in 1982. Born in Hampton, Eason graduated from Hampton High School and the University of North Carolina. He served on the Hampton School Board from 1978 to 1982. In his 16 years as mayor, Eason supported numerous development projects and actively pushed for diversity throughout the city. He was instrumental in establishing the Healthy Families Initiative to promote early-childhood education for all and, during his tenure as mayor, the first African-American to serve as city manager was appointed. He served as president and CEO of Hampton Roads Partnership, director of Hampton's Economic Development Office, and a Hampton Redevelopment and Housing Authority board member.



Juanita F. Gupton

Juanita Gupton was born in North Carolina and raised in Hampton. As a student at Hampton High School, Gupton started working at the clerk of Circuit Court office in the late 1950s as a part of the school's vocational training program. She continued to work in the clerk's office and rose through the ranks to become the deputy clerk of Circuit Court. In 1991, Gupton was appointed Hampton's first female Clerk of Circuit Court, a position that handles a wide variety of tasks and documents, including land records, marriage licenses, divorces, and probate work. She later won a four-year term as clerk, retiring in 1994. Looking back on her career, Gupton said, "I don't think I did anything special. I enjoyed the work and dealing with people... and the public."



Ann Hitch Kilgore

"The Worshipful Madam Mayoress" is how Ann Kilgore once jokingly suggested that fellow council members address her, after reading the title in a letter from an English counterpart. Such was the ground she broke to become Hampton's first female mayor. A native of Portsmouth, Kilgore attended Old Dominion University and The College of William and Mary, graduating with a degree in education. After moving to Hampton with her husband, Kilgore taught English at Hampton High School. She ran for City Council in 1958, the only woman among twelve candidates. She won one of three open seats and served until her retirement in 1980. In 1963, her peers selected Kilgore to become Hampton's first female mayor. She served from 1963 to 1971 and from 1974 to 1978. Kilgore shepherded many progressive economic and civic initiatives, but believed the integration of Hampton's public schools without litigation or grave conflict was her greatest achievement.



John M. Phillips Sr.

Sharing the same name as his grandfather, who founded a successful oyster business in Hampton in the latter part of the 19th century, John Mallory Phillips owned the well-known Phillips Seafood Co. in Hampton for 45 years. In 1974 Phillips became the first African-American in the 20th century to be elected to Hampton City Council. He was re-elected in 1978 and again in 1982, when he became Hampton's first African-American vice mayor after receiving a record number of votes. He served as vice mayor until 1986. Phillips was a prominent alumnus donor to Hampton University and was a member of the First Baptist Church of Hampton, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Dochiki Civic & Social Club, Elks Lodge No. 4 of Hampton, and Omega Psi Fraternity, Inc.

MODERN-ERA TRAILBLAZERS IN PUBLIC SERVICE



Wilford Taylor Jr.

Wilford Taylor Jr. was Hampton's first African-American judge. A graduate of Hampton University and the University of Richmond, Taylor received his law degree at the College of William and Mary. He worked as an attorney in Hampton and became the deputy city attorney in 1983. In 1985, Taylor was appointed to the 8th Judicial District Court and served two terms as chief judge. In 1995, he was appointed to the Circuit Court, where he would serve four terms as chief judge until his retirement in 2017. Taylor continues to serve as an adjunct professor of law at William and Mary, a certified mediator for the Supreme Court of Virginia, and a member of the court's Judicial Ethics Advisory Committee. His career also includes 28 years of service with the US Army Reserves.



George E. Wallace

George Ernest Wallace was born in Williamsburg, Va. on Nov. 23, 1938. He received a bachelor's degree in accounting from North Carolina Central University and a master's degree in public administration from Golden Gate University in San Francisco. In 1975, he became Hampton's assistant manager for community services, and in 1990 he transitioned into the assistant manager of Strategic Planning and Economic Development. Wallace became the city's first African-American city manager in 1997. In 2008 he was elected to Hampton City Council, where he was then made vice mayor. During his second term, he stepped in to fill a mayoral vacancy. During a special election in 2014, he became the first African-American man elected mayor of Hampton. He was awarded Hampton's Distinguished Citizen Medal in 2016.



Yarborough B. Williams Jr.

Y.B. Williams Jr., was the first African-American to serve on the Hampton City Council in the modern era. On August 20, 1973, Williams was appointed by a unanimous vote of the Hampton City Council and served through June of 1974. He was also the first African-American officer of the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., where he served as vice president for community affairs. Williams was a dedicated public servant who served on the board of many community organizations, including the United Way of the Virginia Peninsula, Peninsula Chamber of Commerce, Urban League of Hampton Roads, Virginia Board of Community Colleges, and New Atlantic Bank and First Federal Savings and Loan. When he retired from Newport News Shipbuilding, Hampton declared April 17, 1993 "Y.B. Williams Day."

BIOGRAPHIES

Historical information provided by the Hampton History Museum. For additional stories or to learn more about Hampton's rich history, please visit the museum at 120 Old Hampton Lane, Hampton, Va., 23669, or visit www.hamptonhistorymuseum.org



PHOTO CREDITS

Yarborough B. Williams courtesy of Newport News Shipbuilding
Harriet Nachman Storm courtesy of Lisa Hogge

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MEMORIAL INFORMATION

The Memorial Plaza was designed by Work Program Architects of Norfolk. They used the elements already at the site – cascading water, concrete and earth – and added a fourth, weathering steel.

The common thread of those honored is that they have made significant contributions to their environment, often despite an adversarial social climate. Weathering steel – the material that forms the panels, plaques, and hardware – is as strong as carbon steel to symbolize the strength of those who are honored; however, it will stand the test of time. Weathering steel will react with salt and humidity to create a protective oxide coating that will begin as orange, then transition to a browner hue over several decades. It is safe to touch, but the coating may stain clothing.

Landscape Architect: WPL Site Design of Virginia Beach
Contractor: Kerrick Construction of Hampton

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