

Dissatisfied with the conditions in their segregated all-black high school in Farmville, Virginia, John Stokes and other student leaders organized a strike that would eventually draw national attention. Read Stokes's memoir of the first day of the 1951 strike and answer the questions that follow.

THERE'S A RIOT AT THE SCHOOL

by John A. Stokes

1 **T**he first order of business for the strike committee on Monday morning, April 23, 1951, was to get our principal, Mr. Jones, to leave the campus. Specific students were selected to plant themselves at strategic locations in Farmville. From those vantage points, they made telephone calls to Mr. Jones. Pretending to be adults, they complained that some of his students were downtown creating problems in key public places. Mr. Jones was a strict disciplinarian who never let his students do anything wrong. Just as we knew he would, Mr. Jones left the campus in a huff to check things out.

2 As soon as we saw him leave, we sent a note around to each classroom telling everyone to go to the auditorium for an emergency meeting. Barbara Johns wrote those notes and scribbled her initials, B.J., at the bottom. Everyone assumed "B.J." stood for Boyd Jones. There was no reason to think otherwise. It was a normal occurrence for our principal to call an emergency meeting if anything went wrong, even if it was only about someone littering in the schoolyard. He was a gung-ho stickler for following rules.



3 By the time all the students arrived in the auditorium, the members of the strike committee were sitting on stage behind a drawn curtain. When the curtain opened, I stood up and got the students to quiet down. We opened the assembly with the Pledge of Allegiance. Then we said the Lord's Prayer and sang a song. I don't remember what song it was.

4 After the singing, a committee member asked all the teachers to leave. We knew that if they stayed they could be fired for supporting us, and we didn't want that to happen. They all left except one teacher. He ended up going but not until he was assisted by a couple of nice-size football players. They put him in a classroom and stood guard to make certain he would stay put. We had heard that this teacher was a stooge of the power structure. We wanted to be sure that he couldn't alert them. Two of the other teachers sneaked back into the auditorium. We saw them in there, but we knew that they wouldn't create a ruckus. They were harmless.

5 Barbara Johns addressed the student body first. That's when everyone learned why we had called the assembly. She spoke about the inequalities we were forced to face each day. She explained that nothing would change unless we joined together and demanded a new school facility. Everyone listened intently.

6 We were packed in that room like sardines in a can. It was warm. It was stuffy. But soon everyone was at a fever pitch. Even the shy students caught the spirit as we began singing pep songs. When I saw those quiet, doubting, innocent-acting students shouting, "Two bits—four bits—six bits—a dollar—all for this strike stand up and holler," I knew that we were on a roll. We had gotten the principal and almost all the teachers to leave, and we had won over the pessimists and the quiet ones to our side. I felt nothing could stop our strike now.

7 Man, you talk about rocking. No one was seated. It was like a heavy thunderstorm in full force. I thought to myself, all we need now is for lightning to strike. And lightning did strike. It came in the form of my mother. Right in the middle of one of my cheers, I happened to glance at the entrance door. There stood Mrs. Alice Maria Spraggs Stokes, my mama, with her girlfriend Mrs. Daisy Anderson. I froze. How in the world did she find out about what was going on? Who told her? Was she going to make us call the whole thing off? Most of the students knew her. So did most of the people in the community—the teachers, preachers, merchants, and others. They all respected her. She appeared calm and composed, but I could see that she was evaluating the entire situation. She took it all in. Blocking out the noise and excitement engulfing her, she looked directly at me.



8 Recovered from my frozen state, I gathered myself, went down the stage steps, and approached her.

9 "Mama," I said.

10 She looked me dead in the eyes and asked, "Son are you all all right?"

11 “Yes, Mama,” I answered.
12 She repeated, “No, I mean, are you **all** all right?”
13 Again I answered, “Yes, Mama.”
14 She turned and very calmly said, “OK, Daisy, let’s go!” She and her friend turned
and walked out. WOW! What a relief.

15 Later, I found out that one of the girls had left the campus and had run up Route 15
screaming that there was a riot at the high school—the entire student body was upset and
was meeting in the auditorium. Of course there never was a riot. The whole thing was
very peaceful, but Mama couldn’t have known that then. When she heard the girl, she
must have thought, “Lord, my children are down there.”

16 After Mama left the room, I knew all systems were go. I knew that I would have
Daddy’s support, too. If Mama had said to me, “Boy, you are calling this thing off,” I
would not be writing this book today. I would have said to the students, “Ladies and
gentlemen, head back to your classes. The strike is off.” In fact, if any member of
the strike committee had backed out at this time, the strike would have fallen apart,
and the entire cause would have been lost. The movement had not yet gained any
momentum. We needed all hands on deck to get this ship out of port!

17 Meanwhile, people in town continued to hear that there was an uprising at the
colored high school. News traveled like wildfire in Farmville. As parents and others
hurried down to the school to check out the rioting and to be certain all of the
students were safe, they entered the auditorium. Instead of finding bedlam, they
found an orderly group of student leaders having an assembly. Yet, something strange
seemed to be going on. There was no principal, and no teachers were in sight except
for the two who were peeping around the corner. None of the parents took their
children home. They ended up leaving the school, while the kids remained.

18 When our principal returned from his wild goose chase, he had a puzzled look
on his face. I think that he was upset by what greeted him even though there was
no real disturbance. What he saw was not a riot but a very orderly strike led by his
students. We had been taught to respect authority. We knew that the only path to
accomplishing our goal of gaining a new school had to be a peaceful one.

19 Outside the building, some of the students were carrying picket signs that we had
made up ahead of time. The messages urged the building of a new school and the
destruction of the tar-paper structures.* There was talk of continuing the picketing
until the school board set a date for construction of a new school to begin.

20 The picketing didn’t last long. Word came from the superintendent’s office that if
we weren’t going to attend classes, we had to get off school property. If we didn’t,
we would be arrested for trespassing. That day students went home by their usual
means of transportation. Although some parents when they found out about the strike
thought we should not pursue it, most of them backed it. They were well aware of
the conditions at the school and knew that their own efforts to bring change had met
with one broken promise after another.

* *tar-paper structures* — temporary buildings made from cheap materials

21 As leaders of the strike, we spoke that day with our principal and our parents, informing all of them that we were dissatisfied. We told them that we were not going back to class until something was done. We were striking for a new school. That was it. We also tried to meet with Superintendent McIlwaine, but he refused to see us.

22 While we were trying to figure out a way to talk to the school board, Mr. John Lancaster and Reverend L. Francis Griffin arrived at the school. Mr. Lancaster was the president of our P.T.A. He and his committee had gone head to head with the school board in an attempt to get a new school and other things for colored students and teachers but had been turned down repeatedly. He would become one of our key mentors during the strike. He was fired up all of the time, and we fed off of his energy.

23 Reverend Griffin, who was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Farmville, told us that we could use his church as a meeting place. He was president of the local chapter of the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and he advised us to contact lawyers in the NAACP's Richmond office for legal help with our strike. Founded in 1909, the NAACP is our country's oldest civil rights group.

24 Carrie and Barbara Johns wasted no time in calling the Richmond office. The lawyers were out of town dealing with another case, so the representative they spoke with suggested that they write a letter explaining the situation. Together, Barbara and Carrie drafted a letter, telling them about the strike and asking them to come to Farmville on Wednesday, April 25. They even told them that we would provide a place for them to stay if they needed overnight accommodations (remember at this time there were no hotels for black people in Prince Edward County). Carrie typed it up, and then one of the committee members took it directly to the post office. We felt we couldn't trust any outsider, not even the postman.

25 Day one of the strike had ended.