

Elizabeth Bray Allen Smith Stith

ca. 1692–1774 | Isle of Wight County
PLANTER AND PHILANTHROPIST

Elizabeth Bray (ca. 1692–by February 22, 1774) grew up near Williamsburg and, unlike many young women at the time, learned to read and write. She married Arthur Allen in 1711 and after his death sixteen years later she managed his Surry County plantation and large brick home that later became known as Bacon’s Castle. In order to secure the property that she had inherited for herself and her children, in 1729 she entered into a marriage contract with Arthur Smith. In 1753 she established a £140 trust fund to create a free school for six poor boys and girls in Smithfield. She named the trustees and gave directions for the construction of the building. She specified that boys would study reading, writing, and arithmetic for three years and that girls would study reading and writing for two years. After their schooling the boys would be apprenticed to learn a trade and the girls would learn about household matters from local women.

After her third marriage early in the 1760s, Elizabeth Stith continued her interest in the school. When she wrote her will, she provided for the education of a goddaughter and left £120 and the remainder of her estate to the Smithfield school, which continued to operate at least until the Revolutionary War. She was a wealthy woman with personal property valued at £350, including five enslaved laborers, when she died shortly before her will was proved in the Surry County Court on February, 22, 1774.

Rebekah Dulaney Peterkin

1849–1891 | Richmond
PHILANTHROPIST

The daughter of an Episcopal minister, Rebekah Dulaney Peterkin (September 24, 1849–July 26, 1891) grew up in Richmond. During the Civil War her mother volunteered as a nurse at one of the city’s many hospitals. Peterkin was keenly aware of the financial struggles faced by many residents in her father’s parish, and she participated in a variety of charitable enterprises. About 1887 she organized her church sewing circle into one of Virginia’s earliest chapters of the Order of the King’s Daughters, a Christian service organization. She had long been concerned about the lack of medical care available to the working poor and suggested that the group organize a hospital to provide acute care free of charge.

Peterkin convinced the owner of a boarding house to allow the building to be used rent-free for a year. The sewing circle raised funds, secured supplies, and persuaded a physician to offer his services at no cost. Sheltering Arms Hospital opened in February 1889. Peterkin was the hospital’s treasurer when it was incorporated in March 1891, only a few months before her death. Her leadership and devotion led to the creation of the Rebekah Peterkin Memorial Association, which endowed a room in her honor when the hospital moved to a larger facility in 1894.

Her vision of serving the community’s health care needs continues in the twenty-first century. Sheltering Arms remained the state’s only independent hospital to provide free medical and surgical care until 1981, when it changed its focus to rehabilitative services.

Nancy Melvina “Vinnie” Caldwell

1868–1956 | Carroll County
LEGISLATOR

The daughter of a farmer, Nancy Melvina “Vinnie” Caldwell (August 4, 1868–February 11, 1956) grew up in Carroll County. She

attended the local public school and, at her mother’s urging, took and passed an examination to become a teacher. Miss Vinnie, as she was known, taught at a series of schools until late in the 1890s. Frustrated by her low salary and the difficulties of teaching in an impoverished rural school system, Caldwell left teaching, Galax, and, later, the state.

By 1920 she had returned to Galax and became involved in local politics, probably after women gained the right to vote that year. In 1927, the Democratic Party in Carroll County nominated her for the county’s seat in the House of Delegates. Although southwestern Virginia was a stronghold of the Republican Party, and Republicans captured every other major office in the county, Caldwell defeated her male opponent by a vote of 1,990 to 1,895. She joined three other women in the assembly when it convened in January 1928. She sat on the Committees on Schools and Colleges, on Asylums and Prisons, and on Manufactures and Mechanic Arts. She introduced several bills related to Galax and Carroll County and was a patron of an unsuccessful bill to appropriate \$100,000 for pensions for mothers.

Caldwell did not seek reelection in 1929, but maintained a keen interest in current events for the rest of her life and devoted herself to welfare work in the Galax area.

Nominated by Larnette Snow, librarian, on behalf of the sixth-grade American history students (2013–2014) at St. Paul School, Cana, Carroll County.

Dorothy Shoemaker McDiarmid

1906–1994 | Fairfax County
LEGISLATOR

Dorothy Shoemaker McDiarmid (October 22, 1906–June 8, 1994) represented parts of Fairfax County in the House of Delegates from 1960 to 1962, from 1964 to 1970, and from 1972 to 1989. A Texas native, she grew up around Washington, D.C., earned a B.S. at Swarthmore College, and became a teacher in Northern Virginia. In 1959 she ran for a seat in the General Assembly, hoping to keep the public schools open when the Democratic Party’s leadership had adopted a policy of Massive Resistance to court-ordered school desegregation, and the governor had actually closed some schools rather than let them be desegregated. McDiarmid was a champion of public schools and also promoted legislation to improve services for children and women, including adding kindergarten to the public school schedule.

An able and highly respected legislator, McDiarmid was one of the most influential women ever elected to the House of Delegates and the first woman to serve on its powerful Committee on Rules. From 1986 until she retired, McDiarmid chaired the House Committee on Appropriations—the first woman to preside over the committee that produced the state’s budget. McDiarmid was also a determined advocate for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Submitted to the states by Congress in 1972, it was never approved by the General Assembly. After retiring from the assembly in 1989, she continued to work on issues that were important to her and served as vice chair of the Governor’s Commission on Educational Opportunity for All Virginians.

Ruth Coles Harris

1928– | Richmond
BUSINESS PROFESSOR

Recipient of the VABPW Foundation Business Leadership Award

Charlottesville native Ruth Coles Harris is the great-granddaughter of slaves and grew up during the Great Depression. She graduated at the top of her class at Virginia State College (later University) in 1948 with a degree in business. As an African American woman in the age of Jim Crow, Harris was obliged to leave the state to pursue her education further,

and she earned an MBA from New York University in 1949. She joined the faculty at Virginia Union University and taught in the commerce department. During her nearly forty-eight-year tenure, the small department expanded into the Sydney Lewis School of Business. As the business school’s first director, Harris oversaw the development of its comprehensive curriculum and the growth of its enrollment to more than 400 students. At her retirement in 1997, she was named a Distinguished Professor Emerita.

Hoping to inspire her students, in 1962 Harris took and passed the two-day examination to be a certified public accountant at a time when there were fewer than 100 African American CPAs in the nation. She became the first black woman in Virginia to be certified.

During her career Harris served on several state commissions and on local and national community and professional boards of directors. In 1977 she received her doctorate in education from the College of William and Mary. In 1998 Virginia Union awarded Harris with a Doctor of Humane Letters in recognition of her many contributions to that institution and her field.

Nominated by Maureen Cheatham, librarian at Matoaca High School in Chesterfield County.

Vivian W. Pinn

1941– | Lynchburg
PATHOLOGIST AND
WOMEN’S HEALTH ADVOCATE

Born in Halifax County, Vivian W. Pinn grew up in Lynchburg, where she attended segregated schools. With the support of her family she dreamed of a career as a physician and received a scholarship to attend Wellesley College. After completing her degree in 1963, she entered the medical school at the University of Virginia. Four years later Pinn graduated as the only woman and the only African American in her class. After completing her residency in pathology at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1970, she joined the faculty of Tufts University School of Medicine and was appointed assistant dean for student affairs.

In 1982 Pinn became chair of the department of pathology at the Howard University College of Medicine, the first African American woman to hold such a position in the United States. In 1991 she became the first full-time director of the Office of Research on Women’s Health at the National Institutes of Health, which ensures that women are included in NIH-funded medical studies and seeks to expand women’s leadership roles in research and academic institutions. Among her many honors, she was named a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1994 and the following year received the Elizabeth Blackwell Award from the American Medical Women’s Association. The New York Academy of Medicine honored her in 2011 with its Medal for Distinguished Contributions in Health Policy. Since retiring from NIH in 2011, Pinn continues to advocate the expansion of women’s health research through interviews and speaking engagements.

Nikki Giovanni

1943– | Blacksburg
POET

Poet Nikki Giovanni grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Knoxville, Tennessee. By the time she received her undergraduate degree in history from Fisk University in 1967, she was an outspoken activist for civil rights and equality issues, organizing Cincinnati’s first Black Arts Festival that year. In 1968 Giovanni published her first books of verse, *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* and *Black Judgement*. After brief teaching stints, she joined the English faculty at Virginia Tech in 1987 and became a full professor in 1989.

Widely acclaimed for her verse, Giovanni uses bold language to address social issues based on her experiences as an African American woman. Since 1968, she has published more than two dozen volumes of poetry, essays, and edited anthologies, as well as eleven illustrated children’s books, including the award-winning *Rosa*, about Rosa Parks. Her autobiography, *Gemini*, was a finalist for the 1973 National Book Award. In 2004, her album *The Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection* was a Grammy finalist for the Best Spoken Word Album. Giovanni has received numerous awards, including the inaugural Rosa L. Parks Woman of Courage Award (2002), the Virginia Governor’s Award for the Arts (2000), and *Ebony* magazine’s Woman of the Year (1970), although the most unusual honor may be a South American bat species named for her: *Micronycteris giovanniae*. She is also a seven-time recipient of an NAACP Image Award. A devoted teacher, Giovanni has been a visiting professor and poet-in-residence at numerous colleges, and she encourages students of all ages to express themselves creatively through writing.

Karenne Wood

1960– | Fluvanna County
VIRGINIA INDIAN SCHOLAR
AND ADVOCATE

As a child, Karenne Wood grew up knowing that she was Indian, but because of the centuries of neglect and mistreatment endured by Virginia’s native peoples, she did not fully understand what being Indian meant. She has spent her life answering this question. A member of the Monacan tribe, Wood is completing a doctoral degree in anthropology, for which she began an effort to document and revive the Monacan language. She has sat on the Monacan tribal council and served as tribal historian.

During the 2007 commemoration of Virginia’s colonization, Wood and other Virginia Indians ensured that the history and culture of native Virginians were acknowledged. Wood edited *The Virginia Indian Heritage Trail* (2007), which includes tribal histories and interpretive site descriptions, and curated the exhibition *Beyond Jamestown: Virginia Indians Past and Present*, at the Virginia Museum of Natural History. Her work on behalf of all Indians has included coordinating the return of sacred artifacts to native communities through the Association on American Indian Affairs.

A published poet, Wood earned an MFA in poetry from George Mason University. Her 2001 work *Markings on Earth* won the Diane Decorah Award for Poetry from the Native Writers-Circle of the Americas. Currently she serves as the director of the Virginia Indian Program of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. By reaching out to educators, native communities, and the general public, Wood strives to recognize and highlight the experiences of the people who first shaped Virginia and who continue to shape the commonwealth today.



VIRGINIA WOMEN IN HISTORY 2015

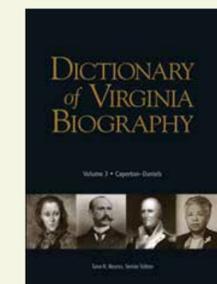
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www.lva.virginia.gov/vawomen



Learn more about Virginia women in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Richmond: The Library of Virginia, 1998–2006), *Changing History: Virginia Women through Four Centuries* (Richmond: The Library of Virginia, 2013) and on the Library of Virginia’s websites, www.lva.virginia.gov and www.virginiamemory.com.

Instructional materials and nomination forms for the 2016 project are available at www.lva.virginia.gov/vawomen.



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Elizabeth Smith

Elizabeth Bray Allen Smith Stith

ca. 1692–1774
Isle of Wight County
PLANTER AND
PHILANTHROPIST

At a time when married women had few rights, Elizabeth Bray Allen Smith Stith used her own funds to establish a free school for poor children.

Rebekah Dulaney Peterkin

1849–1891
Richmond
PHILANTHROPIST

Concerned about the plight of the working poor in Richmond, Rebekah Peterkin organized Sheltering Arms Hospital to provide free medical care.



Nancy Melvina "Vinnie" Caldwell

1868–1956
Carroll County
LEGISLATOR

When elected to the House of Delegates in 1927, Nancy "Vinnie" Caldwell became one of the earliest women to serve in the Virginia General Assembly.

Women have played an integral part in Virginia from its beginnings, yet their contributions have often been overlooked in the history books. Until well into the twentieth century, written histories tended to focus on the historically male-dominated fields of government and politics, the military, and large-scale property ownership to the virtual exclusion of all other venues of leadership or achievement. They ignored women's critical roles as educators, nurses, lay leaders and missionaries, farmers, artists, writers, reformers, pioneers, business leaders, laborers, civic activists, and community builders.

Today, we recognize and celebrate women's accomplishments in all walks of life, particularly in March, which Congress has designated as National Women's History Month. The Library of Virginia presents the 2015 Virginia Women in History project to honor eight women, past and present, who have made important contributions to Virginia, the nation, and the world. We encourage you to learn more about these extraordinary women who saw things differently from their contemporaries, developed new approaches to old problems, served their communities, advanced their professions, strove for excellence based on the courage of their convictions, and initiated changes in Virginia and the United States that continue to affect our lives today.

Dorothy Shoemaker McDiarmid

1906–1994
Fairfax County
LEGISLATOR

As a member of the House of Delegates for more than twenty years, Dorothy S. McDiarmid championed the rights of women and children through legislation.



Ruth Coles Harris

1928–
Richmond
BUSINESS PROFESSOR

The first African American woman to become a certified public accountant in Virginia, Ruth Coles Harris was also the founding director of the Sydney Lewis School of Business at Virginia Union University.



Recipient of the VABPW Foundation Business Leadership Award

Vivian W. Pinn

1941–
Lynchburg
PATHOLOGIST AND
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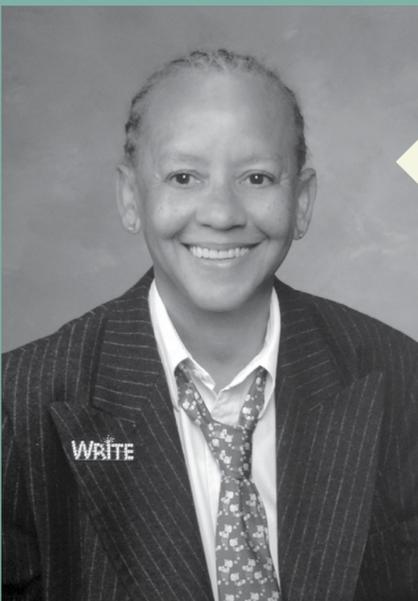
Vivian W. Pinn works to expand women's health programs and leadership roles for women in the field of medical research.



Nikki Giovanni

1943–
Blacksburg
POET

Nikki Giovanni uses her poetry to raise awareness of social issues, particularly those of gender and race.



Karenne Wood

1960–
Fluvanna County
VIRGINIA INDIAN
SCHOLAR AND
ADVOCATE

As director of the Virginia Indian Program, Karenne Wood ensures that the history, traditions, and contributions of Virginia's Indians are incorporated into Virginia's historical narrative.



VIRGINIA WOMEN ^{IN} HISTORY 2015

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