

Arbor Day - Thank you Miss Randolph!

While Sterling Morton is known for establishing the first Arbor Day in Nebraska in 1872, here in Henrico we have our own reasons to be proud of our Arbor Day history.

Virginia E. Randolph was born in Richmond, Virginia, on June 8, 1874, the third of four children of slave parents. At the age of sixteen, she graduated from what is now known as Armstrong High School. After a short teaching experience in Goochland County, she secured a teaching position with the Henrico County School Board and opened the old Mountain Road School in 1892. As a teacher, Randolph taught her students woodworking, sewing, cooking, and gardening, as well as academics. Miss Randolph's efforts were recognized and supported with the establishment of a group of educators known as Jeanes Supervisors. Being the first to receive this title, she continued to work to improve the educational quality and the physical appearance of African-American schools. Reknowned for her teaching skills, we also recognize her as the first to celebrate Arbor Day in the state of Virginia and in Henrico County.

On April 2, 1902, the General Assembly of Virginia empowered the Governor of Virginia to declare an "Arbor Day" annually throughout the State as a day of planting of trees, shrubs, and vines about the houses and along the highways, and about public grounds in this State, thus contributing to the wealth, comfort, and attractions of the State.

On March 19, 1908, Governor Claude Swanson designated March 30, 1908 as Arbor Day in Virginia. Following this exclamation, Miss Randolph organized a two-day ceremony. She purchased sycamore trees with her own money, and on the second day, Miss Randolph, her students, and faculty planted twelve sycamores, one for each of Jesus' disciples. This ceremony is considered to be the first Arbor Day ceremony in Henrico County, the first Arbor Day ceremony at an African American school in Virginia, and very likely the first such ceremony at any African American school in the United States. In 1976, thanks to the efforts of Leon App, former forester with the VA Division of Forestry, these sycamores were the first trees to be designated as Notable and Historic Trees of Virginia. At the same time, these trees were recognized by the American Forestry Association as Historic Trees in the United States.

Through the years, some of these trees have been lost to parking lot and road projects or succumbed to disease. While several replacement trees have been planted over the years, it is believed that there are two remaining "original" trees which stand as living monuments to Miss Randolph's interest in teaching her students the value of our natural resources.

Help keep Miss Randolph's spirit alive -
plant a tree this spring!

