

The Harriet Elizabeth Brown Award

Sponsored by

the Calvert County Commission for Women

for

the 2014 Calvert County History Fair – Junior and Senior Divisions

History isn't just something in books. History doesn't just happen someplace else, to someone else. History happens in our own back yard, with people we know and that our parents or grandparents knew.

What could be a better fit for the 2014 National History Day Competition theme – *Rights and Responsibilities in History* – than the compelling issues raised by Calvert County's own civil rights pioneer, Harriet Elizabeth Brown?

For information about National History Day, see <http://nbd.org/AnnualTheme.htm>

For details about the *Rights and Responsibilities* theme, see

http://nbd.org/images/uploads/397079_2014_NHD_ThemeSheet_FNL.PDF



In 1937 – more than 75 years ago – this brave 30-year-old teacher successfully sued Calvert County Public Schools for paying African-American teachers about half of what equally qualified white teachers received. Back then, Maryland public schools were racially segregated by state law. Ms. Brown earned only \$600 a year, compared to the \$1,100 a year that a white teacher in a white school earned.

Her 29-year-old NAACP attorney, Thurgood Marshall, later became the first African-American Supreme Court Justice. The *Brown vs. Board of Education of Calvert County* case was settled right after Christmas 1937, with Calvert County Public Schools agreeing to equalize salaries for African-American teachers over the next three years.

Ms. Brown passed away – at age 101 – in 2009, not that long ago. Many of her friends and coworkers are still with us today – *primary sources* whom students could interview to get the firsthand story about Harriet Elizabeth Brown's life and contributions.

The Calvert County Commission for Women – and the co-sponsors of the Harriet Elizabeth Brown Award listed below – are encouraging History Fair Projects from both Middle School and High School students that, for example, examine:

- **Ms. Brown's lawsuit and the subsequent settlement:** What difference did it make? Which other states had similar discriminatory pay scales for African-American and white teachers? What happened statewide in Maryland after the 1937 Calvert settlement? Why? What were the rights and responsibilities involved – and *whose* rights and *whose* responsibilities?
- **Harriet Elizabeth Brown's life and times:** How common was it in the 1930s for public school systems to have different (and lower) pay scales for African-American teachers, compared to white teachers? What "rights and responsibilities" issues do these differences raise? What in her life or experience prepared Ms. Brown to file this lawsuit against her employer, Calvert County Public Schools? Who were her allies? Who were her opponents? What were the potential risks and benefits to Ms. Brown of filing this lawsuit? The potential benefits to others?

- **The equal opportunity issues – overt salary discrimination – in Ms. Brown’s lawsuit and settlement:** What is the historical context for salary discrimination by race in the 1930s? What kinds of changes did Ms. Brown’s case set into motion? What was the economic impact of this settlement – on African-American teachers, on school systems, and on communities? Why was this case filed under the 14th Amendment to the Constitution (Equal Protection)? How did Ms. Brown’s case fit into the larger NAACP strategy for fighting racial discrimination?
- **Other issues that place Harriet Elizabeth Brown’s role in a historical perspective,** examine its significance in history, or show how the issues her case addressed developed in the ensuing years.

Co-sponsors this Award include:

Calvert County Branch of the NAACP
Calvert County Heritage Committee
Calvert County Historical Society
Calvert Retired School Personnel Association (“Retired Teachers”)
Concerned Black Women of Calvert County
Friends of the Old Wallville School
Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum
League of Women Voters of Calvert County

Each co-sponsor will play an important role to encourage students to choose the Harriet Elizabeth Brown topic, to educate others about her many contributions, and to publicize and celebrate the winners. For example:

Calvert County Heritage Committee and *Friends of the Old Wallville School* will jointly support the development of new interpretive materials based on these Harriet Elizabeth Brown History Fair projects – for presentations at the Old Wallville School and for other educational and historical purposes.

Calvert County Historical Society: Both the Junior and Senior Division winners will have their projects on display at the Historical Society headquarters (Linden) in Prince Frederick, possibly speak at a Historical Society Brown Bag Lunch Program, and have their projects considered for publication in *The Calvert Historian*.

Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum will promote the topic, publicize the winners with an article in their *Friends* newsletter, and possibly have a special presentation by the winners to their Board of Directors.

If you have questions about the Harriet Elizabeth Brown Award (including if a project qualifies), contact Margaret Dunkle, Chair, Calvert County Commission for Women, at mdunkle@gwu.edu.

Time Line

January & February 2014 – Calvert County middle and high schools’ History Fair contests

March 22, 2014 – Calvert County History Fair competition and awards, Plum Point Middle School

May 3, 2014 – Maryland History Day State Competition and awards – University of Maryland, Baltimore County

June 15-19, 2014 – National History Day events, competition and awards – College Park, MD (*Kenneth E. Bebring National History Day Contest*)

STUDENTS: To pursue a Harriet Elizabeth Brown History Fair project,
talk to your history or social studies teacher today!

TEACHERS: Please encourage your students to take advantage of this opportunity
to document this important and little-known piece of Calvert County history!