

# **“Miss Athelyne Celest Banks: A Celebration of Service to Christ, Church, and Community”**

By Wylheme H. Ragland, Decatur, AL  
Curator-Owner, [The Schaudies-Banks Collection](#)

The writer of the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Scripture cautions the reader to “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths.” Miss Athelyne Celest Banks enjoyed quoting this text from Chapter Three and her life was spent honoring the Lord with the first fruits of prosperity during her lifetime and even in death she blessed the Lord, Church, and community with gladness and singleness of heart.

Miss Banks was born 25 September 1907 to H. J. Banks and Tulie O. Schaudies Banks in the historic Schaudies-Banks Cottage on Sycamore Street in “Old Town Decatur.” Her maternal grandparents were Samuel Schaudies and Abbie Robinson Schaudies and her paternal grandparents were Matthew Hewlett Banks and Eliza Waldon Banks. She is a direct descendant of pioneer families of Decatur, Alabama and Huntsville, Alabama who were living in Alabama as early as 1825. Her paternal grandfather, Matthew Hewlett Banks, was the second man of color to be elected to the Decatur City Council after The Reconstruction of the South. His son and her father, H. J. Banks, was a wealthy entrepreneur and City of Decatur Bill Poster. H. J. Banks was also appointed by Governor Bibb Graves as a Notary Public for Morgan County on 14 October 1937. Governor Graves signed the Certificate of Appointment for H. J. Banks.

At the age of seven, Miss Banks made her profession of faith and was confirmed when King’s Memorial United Methodist Church was then known as St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church and the Rev. Alexander Samuel Williams was pastor. At a young age she was faithful, diligent, and committed to serving others. St. Paul was renamed King’s Memorial in 1908 in honor of Bishop Willis Jefferson King and his father because of the great revival of 1908 at St. Paul. Regardless of the name of the congregation or the tenure of the pastor, her Church was one of the three pillars of living out her faith and exercising her stewardship.

She was Church Treasurer for over fifty years and her other church ministries included: The Chancel Choir, The United Methodist Women, The Carrie Harris Circle, Trustee, Decatur District Trustee, Finance and Stewardship Committee, and consultant for the Miss A. C. Banks After School Academy.

Education was another pillar supporting the life of Miss Banks and education was essential for service and stewardship. Through the efforts of Matthew Hewlett Banks and other Decatur Republican Leaders, the City of Decatur affirmed the right of public education for “colored students” and St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church building was used as one of the first permanent sites for the students. Her parents insisted on excellence for her and after completing the eighth grade in Decatur, she was sent to Nashville, Tennessee and was graduated from historic Pearl High School on 14 June 1928 when R. S. Harris was principal. Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College was her choice for higher education and she was graduated on 12 August 1949 with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education with her diploma signed by President Joseph F. Drake and Governor James Folsom.

Miss Banks devoted forty-two years of her life to education and twenty-nine of those years were spent as Principal-Teacher for the George Washington Carver elementary School in Decatur. She remembered with great joy the years she taught at the Morgan County Julius Rosenwald School of Talucah in Valhermoso Springs and the Morgan County Julius Rosenwald School at Cedar Lake. Miss Banks is the first woman of color to be principal for the Decatur George Washington Carver Elementary School. She

is the first woman of color in twentieth century Decatur appointed principal, and insofar as can be researched the first Decatur Native of color appointed principal within the Decatur School District.

Although she was retired in 1974, she shared “I have worked harder since retirement and I am involved in more activities now than fifty years ago.” When she retired and was not busy with church work, she was able to devote quality time to the Mental Health Center, The Mental Health Association, The congenial Club, the Eva Sterrs Boys and Girls Club, the Decatur General Foundation, the Decatur City Schools Foundation, the American Red Cross, and other charities. She was their benefactor in life and in death they were recipients of her charitable bequeaths.

Because of her dedication and commitment to Christian values, religious tolerance, mental health supporter, advocacy for homeless, and educational pursuits, she received various awards that include but are not limited to: Treasurer Emeriti, King’s Memorial United Methodist Church; the Miss Athelyne c. Banks After School Academy; Miss Athelyne C., Banks Mini-School Grant, The Decatur City Schools Foundation, National Conference for Community and Justice; Chamber of Commerce Humanitarian of the Year; Decatur General Foundation’s John A. Caddell Awards; Decatur City Miss A. C. Banks Park; and Banks-Cadell Elementary School.

Miss Banks died at Decatur General Hospital on 7 February 2006 and is buried in the Decatur City Cemetery in the historic Banks Family Area of the Cowan Section. She truly was the “little lady with the big heart” and because of her generosity and compassion the City of Decatur, as the Rev. Raphael k. Gray stated, can “Bank on a Brighter Future.”