

Following the Civil War and Emancipation, Matthew H. Banks found success as a Republican leader. Matthew H. Banks was part of the group who founded King's Memorial United Methodist Church. He helped to convince the City of Decatur to support the right to public education for African American children. This resulted in the St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church building becoming one of the first sites of an African American school, and he was the second man of color elected to the Decatur City Council after Reconstruction. Matthew H. Banks was the beginning of a legacy of a very prominent family in the African American community through the 20th century.

Matthew Hewlett Banks married Eliza Walden (born 1844) around 1865. Together, they had at least five children, one of which was Hewlett J. Banks. Eliza was a member of the St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church's Ladies Aid Society along with Abbie Robinson Schaudies. Eliza's son and Abbie's daughter were Miss Athelyne's parents.

### Hewlett J. Banks (1875-1966) and Tulie Ophelia Schaudies (1875-1964)

Tulie Schaudies and Hewlett J. Banks were Miss Athelyne's parents. H. J. Banks was a noted entrepreneur in Decatur. Like his father, he was a Republican, businessman, and appointed Notary Public of Morgan County by Governor Bibb Graves on October 14, 1937. During the Scottsboro Boys Trial, H. J. Banks was 55 years old and was known as a bill plasterer. He was one of the men of color brought forward to testify against racial discrimination and provided a list of potential jurors. According to Ms. Towns, when he approached the witness box, Mr. Banks was dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, matching tie and kerchief, looking like the well-respected former alderman and successful businessman that he was. During his testimony, Mr. Banks stated he had been voting for the last 15



(Left) Dr. Willis Sterrs (Right) Sterrs Infirmary and Nurse Training School, Image Courtesy of Ms. Peggy Allen Towns and the Decatur Daily

years – something that became increasingly difficult for people of color after the 1901 rewriting of the Alabama State Constitution.

Tulie was born in the Schaudies-Banks Cottage that her parents bought. Samuel Schaudies celebrated Tulie's birth by commissioning a portrait of his wife and newborn daughter. When she was grown, Tulie and H. J. Banks were wed in the parlor of the cottage. They had one daughter, Miss Athelyne Celest Banks.

### Athelyne Celest Banks (1907-2006)

Athelyne Celest Banks was a spinster and an only child. She may have been the last remaining Schaudies or Banks from her direct family lines. Miss Banks lead a full and generous life in Decatur. She was the first female person of color and native-born Morgan County resident to be principal of a local school. She dedicated her life and wealth to the community, giving freely to organizations, institutions, and groups such as the Boys and Girls' Club, King's Memorial Church, the mentally ill, and the homeless.

### Dr. Willis Sterrs and Eva Sterrs

Dr. Willis Edward Sterrs (1867-1921) was Decatur's first African American physician. Born in Montgomery, he first attended school at Lincoln Normal University – now Alabama State University – and graduated in 1885. From there, he attended medical school at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor where he graduated as a doctor of medicine on June 8, 1888. Moving back to Alabama, he briefly practiced in Montgomery before moving with his wife, Eva Sterrs, to Decatur. In Decatur, Dr. Sterrs owned the Magnolia Drug Store and the People's Dry Goods Store on Bank Street, where he was

**1 The First Colored Man.**  
Dr. W. E. Sterrs has been appointed a member of the Pension Board of Decatur, which is the first appointment of a colored man in the state. Dr. Sterrs is a worthy physician, and we congratulate the good people on securing his services. Now that the plums have begun to fall, we hope to see Dr. Scruggs appointed a member of the Huntsville board.

**2 The New Decatur Advertiser,** which is always up to date got out a Mammoth "Special Edition" last week, in which it gave Decatur and its people a special write up. It presented a picture of Dr. W. E. Sterrs residence and said of him:  
Dr. W. E. Sterrs has been in Decatur for nine years, and has, during that time, gained the esteem of all classes who know him, by his unblemished character, gentlemanly deportment and honorable dealing. He has built up a lucrative practice in town and the surrounding country, which is extending every year. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan, holding diplomas from that institution in medicine, also in Electro-Therapeutics, Histology, Bacteriology and Pharmacy. He graduated in 1885 from Lincoln University of Marion, Ala. He holds a commission as United States pension examiner. Dr. Sterrs practiced in Montgomery for two years before coming to Decatur, and on the 14th of April, 1899, was elected president of the Alabama Medical Congress. He is a splendid example of the best class of the colored race and shows to what a high state of intelligence, learning and good moral character one of that race can attain with a course of good training and a close attention to the study of the noble profession of which he is so worthy a member, the example of a fair man like him will do more to elevate his people than all the lectures that are given.

**STERRS AGAIN HEADS NEGRO I. O. O. F.**  
**LOCAL PHYSICIAN RESPONSIBLE FOR GROWTH OF ORDER.**  
**3**  
The twelfth biennial meeting of the grand lodge and convention of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, colored, has just adjourned at Normal, Ala. Dr. W. E. Sterrs, a well-known negro physician of Decatur, was re-elected grand master. He has served as grand master for a number of years. Some years ago, when he became the head of the order in Alabama, the order was in debt several thousand dollars. Now all of the indebtedness has been paid, and the order has several thousand dollars to its credit. This is today the strongest negro order in Alabama.  
This session of the grand lodge voted \$10 to the Booker T. Washington memorial fund. It is understood that negro secret orders all over the United States are making donations to the fund.  
The grand lodge will meet in Birmingham in 1918, at which time there will be begun a collection fund for the purpose of erecting a monument over the grave of the late Past Grand Master William Hooper Council. Council was for many years president of Normal college for negroes at Normal, Ala., near Huntsville. He was regarded as being one of the most brilliant negroes in the nation. He was the founder of Normal.

**WELL KNOWN NEGRO PHYSICIAN DROWNS IN BEAVER LAKE**  
**4**  
Willis E. Sterrs, one of the best known negro physicians in Alabama, was drowned Friday morning in Beaver Lake, across the river from here in Limestone county. He had been fishing with a business associate and in some manner fell from the boat, going down before aid could be given him.  
News of the death was brought here and grappling hooks were taken to the lake in an effort to locate the body.  
The deceased was the founder of the Cottage Home Infirmary, the first hospital for negroes in this section and one of the first infirmaries in the Tennessee Valley.  
During his life, he had been connected with many movements looking to the advancement of his race and he had many friends among the white people of the Twin Cities.  
The body was discovered shortly after noon and brought back to Decatur. Funeral arrangements are being made.

pharmacist, and opened the Cottage Home Infirmary and Nurse Training School on Vine Street. Dr. Sterrs was also a notary public.

His wife, Eva A. Young Sterrs was born in 1871 in Canada. She moved south with her husband and became the publisher and editor of Decatur's first African American newspaper called *The Guardian*. She was also known

for encouraging and investing in education. Dr. Sterrs died in 1921 when his fishing boat capsized on Beaver Lake (no longer in existence after the flooding of the Tennessee River). He is buried in the Sterrs Section of the Decatur City Cemetery, which is named for him and his wife. Mrs. Sterrs stayed in Decatur until her death in 1958 and left large sums of money to several organizations in the community. Her will left

(Top) (1) "The First Colored Man," Excerpt from The Journal, Huntsville, Alabama, April 30, 1897 (2) "Dr. Sterrs has been in Decatur for Nine Years," Excerpt from The Journal, Huntsville, Alabama, June 16, 1899 (3) "Sterrs Again Heads Negro I.O.O.F.," Excerpt from The Decatur Daily, Decatur, Alabama, August 1, 1916 (3) "Well Known Negro Physician Drowns in Beaver Lake," Excerpt from The Albany-Decatur Daily, April 29, 1921 (Newspapers.com) (Left) Sterrs Infirmary, 1900.

