



Who was Theresa Banks?

Theresa Douglas Banks (Glenarden, Educator and Community Activist), born in 1905

This is an age old question that extends back to when we started the swim club. We originated at the Theresa Banks Memorial Pool in Glenarden, Maryland in 1990, thereby utilizing the name of the facility. Before moving into the PG County Sports and Learning Complex, the question was only sporadic. After moving, the question came more frequently. So now you can give a real answer to all who ask!

A committed educator, tireless community activist and dedicated welfare worker, Theresa Banks was noted for her positive attitude toward life, noting "Everyone has dignity and worth," "Education is life, not preparation for life," "Stand on your tiptoes and reach for your goals," and "I want to push and drag the power structure into the 20th century." Her numerous activities and contributions reflected how she regularly practiced her beliefs. Few days ended that she did not help improve the lives of others. Ms. Banks was a native Prince Georgian and taught in the county's public school system for forty-eight years, from 1924 until her death in 1972. Her career spanned two generations and bridged the divide between black and white schools in the county. She had a very effective teaching style, so in addition to conducting classes, she also trained others teachers.

Ms. Banks worked for parity in black and white teachers' salaries, often appearing before the Maryland General Assembly to argue her case. Thanks in large measure to her appeals, parity was achieved in 1947. She also worked for equality in voter registration, Girl Scouting, the Black Teacher's Credit Union—until it's merger with the P.G. Federal Credit union in 1963.

As a tireless community activist, Ms. Banks was a founding member of the Prince George's County Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority in 1949 and served as its first president. She was the first female member of the Glenarden Town Council and served as the Town Clerk for several years. She was active in the Tri-Area Civic Association (North Englewood, Chapel Oaks and Fairmont Heights), serving as president at least twice.

Ms. Banks worked with the NAACP on voter registration, raising scholarship moneys, and the Model Cities Programs. She was a Sunday school superintendent at the First Baptist Church in Glenarden and was active in the Whitfield Chapel Church in Lanham. She was also a sixth-grade teacher at Highland Park Elementary School. She was an active support of the Girl Scouts, organizing bake sales and overnight camping excursions.

Often using her own money, Ms. Banks purchased food, clothing, bedding, shoes and other essentials for the destitute, aged and infirm, and disaster victims. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, she delivered food baskets to the needy. She also made sure that the residents at Boys Village in Cheltenham received much-needed items, and even an occasional gift. When flooding in the Beaver Dam Creek area left thirty families homeless, she coordinated efforts to find them shelter.

Between her professional responsibilities and civic commitments, Ms. Banks managed to earn her bachelor's degree from Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland in 1939, followed by her master's degree from Howard University in Washington, DC in 1948. She continued expanding her knowledge by taking courses in law and education at Catholic University, George Washington University and the University of Maryland-College Park.

Ms. Banks spearheaded successful efforts to establish a branch of the county's public library system in Fairmont Heights. Today her portrait hangs in the children's room. Another lasting tribute to her commitment to improving the quality of life in her community is the Theresa D. Banks Memorial Pool (the Glenarden/Theresa Banks Complex). She was inducted into the Prince George's County Women's Hall of Fame in 1988.

She is noted as one of the Past/Present Women-Elected Council Members who served in Glenarden, Maryland from 1939-1943. Ms. Banks represented many groups. Among them, she was the Christian Socialist Chairman of the Ebenezer Church; she represented the South African Paper Conservation group (SAPCON); she organized the NAACP and held it together in Prince George's County.

The most sweeping testimonial to Ms. Banks' professional accomplishments and community service on behalf of the citizens of Prince George's County is the annual Theresa D. Banks Service Award, which is given to a deserving citizen by the Prince George's County Human Relations Commission. Ms. Banks was a strong proponent of the commission and actively campaigned for its establishment.

At the age of 67, on March 15, 1972, she collapsed of a heart attack and died, while testifying before the Prince George's County Council at the Glenarden Town Hall, on the proposed establishment of a Human Relations Commission Bill. In recognition of her efforts, Prince George's County Councilman Ronald R. Reeder introduced an amendment to the Human Relations Commission Bill, CB 1-1972, to list Ms. Banks as an honorary sponsor of the bill.

Those who knew her considered her a brave visionary who created these times, a warrior who was prepared for and did battle, always for the good of the people, an organizer of diverse groups and a leader, a committed and dedicated educator, and a one-person social service agency.

She will always be remembered as a courageous leader and dedicated educator. We, the Theresa Banks Swim Club, salute Ms. Theresa D. Banks as a pioneer and a visionary.

THERESA DOUGLAS BANKS
Educator and Community Activist, c.1900-1972

SPEECH: *Theresa D Banks, just before she collapsed of a heart attack and died on March 15, 1972.*

For How Many? For All!

I'm going to turn just another way, because I'm going to talk to the others as well as you, if I may. The last time I spoke, I went home and had a heart attack, which wasn't too long ago. However, I guess it was worth it. I'm going to start off by saying I represent so many groups that it is hard for me to say all. I am the Christian Socialist Chairman of the Ebenezer Church. I represent SAPCON. I organized the NAACP and held it together in Prince George's County. I organized Zeta Phi Beta Chapter who has done a terrific job in the County.

I'm going to start off by saying that I cannot do much about who started the stars real bright. My tiny being cannot shine as far into the darkness of the night. Yet I am a part of God's great plan. And I want to salute Mr. Reeder for the stand he has taken, to be courageous, to be fearless, to be unselfish for this cause. When you stop to think that in this day and time that we are reverting back to slavery.

I would like for all of you to say along with me the "Pledge to the Flag" and watch every word that say as you say it. Will you please say it with me!

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, unto the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and just—FOR HOW MANY? FOR ALL... And every time you say that, whether you are black or whether you are white, you are saying something that is not true, though.

I am not an ordained Minister, I am a licensed speaker for the Methodist Church. And I am going to go at this at a route from the way the others have gone. "God", he is on your side. It's more than if all the world is against you, and I am taking him for my guide tonight. Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, my little ones, you have done it unto me. Think of that!

Out of one blood, God made the human race. If He made us out of one blood, then we ALL are kin. And in as much as you push me aside, you are pushing yourself aside.

Because I am your sister, you are my sister. Whether you are black; whether you are white; whether you are gray; whether you're grizzly; whether you are yellow or whether you are red.

The arms of the Lord are upon us at this time. He has watched everything we say, everything we do. And you must give an account in the judgment for how you treated your brother. If you remember Cain and Abel, when the brother was slain, he said: "Am I my brother's keeper?" HE said: "You are responsible for the blood that we spilled for your brother".

And everyone here is responsible for everything that you do, everything that you say, and everything that you think that is not the right thing because of a person's color. You have put the black race into the position they are in. You went to Africa; you placed the throne; you brought us here and then YOU treat us like slaves. YOU are responsible, I implore you!"



Clinton Grove Elementary (left), Theresa Douglas Banks image (center) Rosaryville Elementary (right)

In Prince George's County, the African-American community and sympathetic whites were the primary advocates for public education for black children. One notable example was a woman named Theresa Douglas Banks. Banks would make the history of education for African Americans in Prince George's County the subject of her master thesis and the focus of her career as an educator.

Theresa Douglas Banks, Educator" The Development of Public Education for the Negro in Prince George's County (1872-1946)" was submitted on June 29, 1946. Banks based her work on an examination of the minutes of the Prince George's County Board Of Education, oral history interviews, and other primary and secondary sources.

In her thesis she wrote: "The influences which contributed to the starting and developing of Negro public education in Prince George's County during the period from 1872 to 1900 have been due to: 1) personal visits made to the school board by parents and teachers, 2) the cooperation of interested white persons, 3) the passing of certain laws

by the Legislature which helped to improve educational opportunities for Negroes; and 4) to the organization and operation of the Negro teachers within the county."

Each school and community struggled with insufficient resources to meet the growing demand for buildings, supplies, and support for professional staff at Black schools. The records of the school board continued to reflect numerous requests for personnel, equipment, and the appointment of trustees to local schools. The records are scarce, and much of what exists is recorded in the Board Minutes and in documents such as that written by Theresa Douglas Banks, or in reports in black-owned newspapers, such as the Washington Bee.

The following narrative is adapted from the 1927 study of Theresa Douglas Banks, a Prince George's County educator. Ms. Banks wrote her Master's Thesis on the history of education for black people in Prince George's County covering the period of 1827 to 1946.

Events before, during and after World War II had a significant impact on the progress of education for African-Americans prior to the 1954 Brown versus Board of Education decision. In her 1927 study of the history education for Negroes in Prince George's County, Theresa Douglas Banks wrote, "buildings were for the most part inadequate, transportation was very limited, and qualified teachers were very difficult to secure because of the low salaries paid."

In previous years, state legislation was passed that also increased the salary of black teachers and improved the conditions of black schools. In her study, Ms. Banks wrote, "The passing of the minimum salary law in 1918; the creation of the State Equalization Fund in 1922; the "Teacher's Certification Law" established in 1924; and the enactment of "Retirement Legislation" in 1920, which was improved upon in 1927 have all contributed to the establishment of better educational conditions for Negro teachers in Maryland and Prince George's County."

By 1937, black parents around the county continually pressed the Board of Education for increased transportation for their students, including black parents and white supporters from southern area communities of Clinton, TeeBee, and Oxon Hill. The number of black children passing from elementary education to the secondary school level grew each year. "Each succeeding year, as the transportation situation improved, an increased enrollment of high school children is noted," wrote Ms. Banks.

The Delta Zeta Zeta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. was established on December, 3 1949 in Prince George's County, Maryland. The charter members of the chapter are: Theresa D. Banks, Evelyn Campbell, Alice Barnes, Mabel Carter, Eva Coachman, Bernice Dickenson, Rachel Prather, Maggie Trotter, Agnes Waters, Virginia Watson, Charity Young.