

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Bass Reeves

(July 1838 – January 12, 1910)

"First African-American Deputy U.S. Marshal"

Bass Reeves was born into slavery in Crawford County, Arkansas, in July of 1838. His family was owned by Arkansas state legislator, William Steele Reeves. Bass grew up working alongside his parents, first as a water boy and then as a field hand. Around 1846, William Reeves moved his family and slaves to Grayson County, Texas. When Bass grew into a 6'2" man, he was turned over to George Reeves, William's son, to be his bodyguard and accompany him on trips. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Texas sided with the Confederacy and George Reeves went into battle, taking Bass with him.

During the Civil War, Bass ran away from George Reeves, and fled to Indian Territory, taking refuge with the Seminole, Cherokee, and Creek Indians, learning customs, languages, and tracking skills. After the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Bass left Indian Territory and bought land near Van Buren, Arkansas. There he married Nellie Jennie, and raised 10 children - five girls and five boys. When he wasn't working on his ranch, he would often serve as a guide for U.S. Deputy Marshals searching for criminals in the area.

In 1875, when U.S. Marshal James Fagan was appointed, he was told to hire 200 deputies to recover fugitives hiding Indian Territory. Hearing of his tough reputation and ability to speak several tribal languages, Fagan immediately recruited Bass Reeves as a U.S. Deputy Marshal, making him the first African-American deputy marshal, west of the Mississippi River. The deputies were given a stack of warrants and on Judge Parker's orders, charged with bringing the fugitives in, alive — or dead. Since Bass was never taught to read or write, he would have someone read the warrants out loud and memorize the contents. When asked to produce the warrant at an arrest, he never failed to pull the correct one.

In 1897, after 22 years, Bass was transferred to the Muskogee, Oklahoma Federal Court. When Oklahoma became a state in 1907, sixty-eight year old Bass Reeves, became a police officer for the Muskogee, Oklahoma, police department. But two years later, health issues would force his thirty-four year law enforcement career, to come to an end.



On January, 12, 1910, Bass Reeves died. He was 72 years old.

In 2007, the U.S. Route 62 Bridge at the Arkansas River between Muskogee and Fort Gibson, Oklahoma was named the Bass Reeves Memorial Bridge in his honor. In 2012, a bronze statue of Reeves by sculptor Harold Holden, of Enid, Oklahoma, was cast at a foundry in Norman, Oklahoma. It was then moved to its permanent location at Pendergraft Park in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

