

# The Clerk's Black History Series



## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



### Claude Dixon, Henry Hooks, Johnnie Jones, Ernest Lyons, Robert McKibbens, John Sanders, Willard Strickland and Willie Elkins

(April 3, 1948)

#### Atlanta's First African-American Police Officers



Front: Henry Hooks, Claude Dixon, Ernest H. Lyons; back: Robert McKibbens, Willard Strickland, Willie T. Elkins, Johnnie P. Jones, and John Sanders

**The first African-American Atlanta Police Officers**, Claude Dixon, Henry Hooks, Johnnie Jones, Ernest Lyons, Robert McKibbens, John Sanders, Willard Strickland and Willie Elkins began their shift on April 3, 1948. All but one of the newly commissioned officers were WWII veterans and ranged in age from 21 to 32. Mayor William Hartsfield, under pressure from local African-American leaders, consented to hire the officers, along with Police Chief Herbert Jenkins. Before their first shift, Hartsfield gave a solemn speech reminding the officers that most white officers didn't want them on the force, but they were there to do what Jackie Robinson had done for baseball. When the officers left roll call on the first day, they stepped into a circus-like atmosphere with a crowd of nearly 400 people parading behind them down Auburn Avenue. Even after they separated to patrol their specific beats, the crowds stayed close behind. The new officers were first to integrate the Atlanta Police Department, but operated under different rules than their white counterparts. The "Eight" were not allowed to use the Atlanta Police Headquarters, instead they operated out of the Butler Street YMCA basement or rather the "Black City Hall." The officers also had restrictions on their level of authority.

They were not allowed to drive police cars or wear their uniforms to or from work. They were not allowed to arrest "well-to-do" white citizens, but were required to stop any crimes in progress. They were allowed to arrest white vagrants or drunkards, but the color limitations left the officers frustrated and defeated when many white offenders would walk or drive away, refusing to acknowledge their authority. In more serious offenses, black officers were forced to call white officers to make the arrest. The officers however did make the same pay rate as their white counterparts of \$196 .00 a month. Officer Jones and Hooks made the first arrest in 1948 with a charge of "holding illegal whiskey." The perpetrator was found guilty and fined \$300.00.



The officers brought hope to the black neighborhoods they served. For many residents, having police officers who not only lived in their community but were members of their community, gave them a sense of safety and dignity. The pressure of policing under racial tensions proved to be too much for some of the officers and after only two months, Willie Elkins left the force. He went on to attend Morehouse College and died in 1970. John Sanders left the force after one year, and reenlisted in the Army. He died in 2003. Willard Strickland stayed with ADP until 1964 when he left to go to the City of Decatur to help integrate their police department, becoming one of the first two African-American police officers to patrol those streets. He retired in 1969 and died in 1990. Henry Hooks, Robert McKibbens and Ernest Lyons all retired from APD in 1980. Henry Hooks who retired as a Sergeant, died in 1996. Robert McKibbens, who also retired a Sergeant, died in 1994. Ernest Lyons, who dreamed of being a police officer since he was a child, died in 2000. And Claude Dixon, the youngest of the eight officers died in 1982.