

# The Clerk's Black History Series



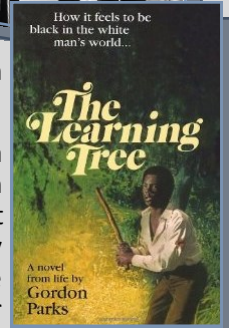
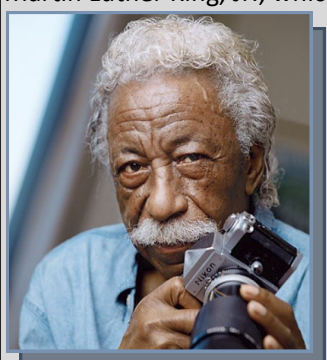
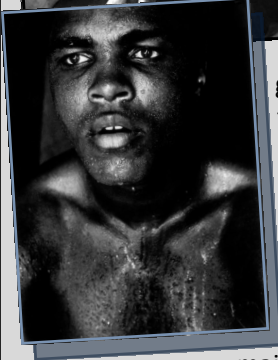
## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



# Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks

First African-American Photographer for Life and Vogue Magazines  
First African-American to Direct a Major Hollywood Movie  
(November 30, 1912 – March 7, 2006)

**Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks** was born on November 30, 1912, in Fort Scott, Kansas. Gordon Parks was the youngest of 14 children born to Sarah and Jackson Parks. He attended a segregated elementary school and was barred from participating in activities at his high school because of his race. At 14, Parks was sent to live with relatives in St. Paul, MN after the death of his mother. He was soon forced out on his own and working at odd jobs to survive. While working as a train waiter, traveling across the United States, Parks found a photo magazine that would inspire his love of travel and photography. At 25, he bought his first camera at a second-hand store for \$12.50 and after returning to Chicago, received a fellowship in photography from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. Parks started working at the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal agency designed to combat poverty in rural life. It was in 1942, while working at the FSA, that Parks took his first professional photograph dubbed, "American Gothic" for its similarities to the original photograph taken in 1930. Parks' iconic image depicts a black woman, Ella Watson, who mopped floors in the FSA, standing before the American flag holding a mop and broom. It has become his signature image and appeared on the front page of *The Washington Post* that year. Parks' career in photography had begun. After moving with his wife to Harlem, NYC, Parks became the first African-American fashion photographer for *Vogue* magazine. But it was his continued work photographing social injustice, poverty, crime, violence, civil rights, and segregation throughout America that earned him a position on staff as the first African-American photographer with *Life* Magazine. Parks remained at *Life* magazine for two decades, chronicling subjects related to racism and poverty, as well as taking memorable pictures including Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael. Parks' photographs with both *Vogue* and *Life* are some of the most iconic pictures in American photography history.



Parks also made a name for himself in film as the first African-American film producer for a major studio. He wrote his biographical novel, *The Learning Tree*, based on his childhood in Fort Scott, penned the screenplay, then composed the musical score. However, it was the movie *SHAFT* in 1971 that cemented Parks as the first commercially viable African-American director. *Shaft*, a 1971 detective film directed by Parks and starring Richard Roundtree as John Shaft, became a major hit that spawned a series of films that would be labeled as, "Blaxploitation." Not widely recognized, but among the great works of Parks is a ballet written to honor Martin Luther King, Jr., which premiered in Washington, D.C. in 1989. Also to his credit is a piano concerto, a symphony for an orchestra and 23 books. Although he did not graduate from high school, Parks received 50 honorary doctorate degrees and hundreds of other honors including Photographer of the Year, American Society of Magazine Photographers and Kansan of the Year.

The 93-year-old Gordon Parks died of cancer on March 7, 2006, in New York City. He is buried in his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas. Today, Parks is remembered for his pioneering work in the field of photography, which has been an inspiration to many. The famed photographer once said, "People in millenniums ahead will know what we were like in the 1930's and the important major things that shaped our history at that time. This is as important for historic reasons as any other."