

# The Clerk's Black History Series



## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

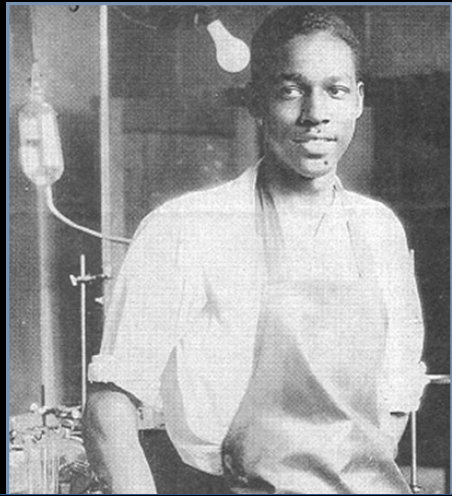


# Vivien Thomas

(August 29, 1910 - November 26, 1985)

*Legend in the Field of Heart Surgery*

After a bank crash in 1930 wiped out his entire savings and his dream of going to medical school, Vivien Thomas, an aspiring physician, dropped out of college and in the height of the Great Depression, took a job as a lab assistant at Vanderbilt University to Dr. Alfred Blalock.



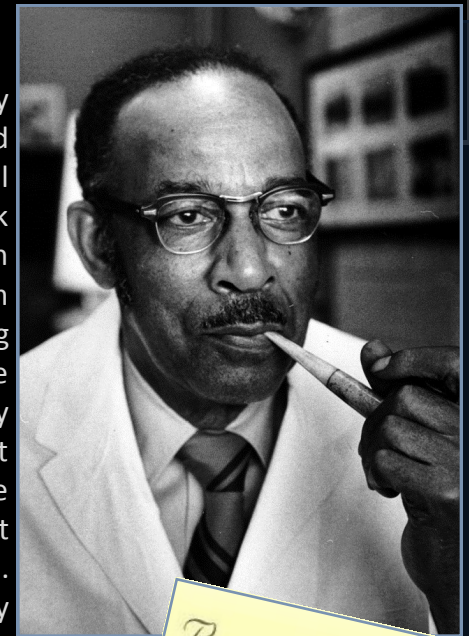
Even though in the mid-1930's Thomas was doing the work of a post-doctoral researcher in Dr. Blalock's lab, Vivien Thomas was classified and paid as a janitor at the University.

Thomas was a quick study, with particularly skillful hands. He worked diligently and learned to perform surgical operations, chemical

reaction procedures and data analysis with precision. His quiet dedication to Blalock and the experiments were invaluable. When Blalock moved to Johns Hopkins in 1941, he asked Thomas to accompany him. Thomas joined Blalock's surgical team and helped to develop the "Blue Baby" operation, also known as the Blalock-Taussig shunt. Blue Baby (Tetralogy of Fallot) is a congenital defect involving multiple abnormalities of the heart. Before Thomas and Blalock developed the Blue Baby operation, 25 percent of babies born with this condition died before their first birthday to the age of ten, 70 percent would die. The procedure to correct Blue

Baby was painstakingly worked out by Thomas over a two-year period. Ultimately, he joined an artery leaving the heart, to an artery leading back to the lungs. This gave the blood a second opportunity to absorb the critical oxygen and transport it throughout the body. Delicate instruments were needed to perform the corrective heart surgery on their tiny newborn patients. Since no such instruments then existed, Thomas designed and built them himself.

Along with Dr. Blalock, Vivien Thomas helped develop the 'blue baby' operation at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The book, "Partners of the Heart" and later two feature films were produced telling the amazing story of the unlikely duo.



Vivien Thomas, top left, stands behind Dr. Alfred Blalock during an early operation at Johns Hopkins.

