



# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County John Baxter Taylor, Jr.



(November 3, 1882 – December 2, 1908)

“First African American to Win an Olympic Gold Medal”

“First African American to Represent the U.S. in an International Sporting Competition”



**John Baxter Taylor, Jr.** was born on November 3, 1882, in Washington D.C. Sometime during John's childhood, the family relocated to Philadelphia. John attended the prestigious Central High School in Philadelphia and joined the championship track and field program in his junior year. He would later be chosen as track team captain. He was also named interscholastic quarter-mile champion for two-years running. Following his graduation from Central in 1902, John spent one year at Brown Prep, also located in Philadelphia. In the fall of 1903, John enrolled in the Wharton School of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania and he joined the varsity track team in the spring of 1904. In May 1904, at the Intercollegiate Association of Amateur Athletes of America (IC4A) championship, John won the 440-yard run, breaking the intercollegiate record. In 1905, John withdrew from school, returning in the fall to the School of Veterinary Medicine.

John returned to track in 1906, training under Mike Murphy, one of the best track coaches in the world. In 1907, John won the 440-yard race with a record of 48-4/5 seconds at the IC4A championship. In September, he won at the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) championship in Norfolk, VA, setting an indoor record of 48.35 seconds for the quarter mile. After this win, the mostly white audience who witnessed John be deliberately fouled by another white runner, erupted in cheer. Hundreds of Southern white men rushed to congratulate John, shaking his hand - an almost unheard-of thing for a black man in the South.

The following spring, despite suffering with a hernia, John won his third quarter mile championship and anchored the one-mile relay. In June 1908, he graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree from the School of Veterinary Medicine.

In July 1908, qualified athletes gathered in London, UK for the Fourth Olympiad. John Taylor was the first African American to represent the United States in an international sports competition. Early on, John competed in a controversial 400-meter relay final. British officials called the race before the four competitors crossed the finish line asserting that one of the Americans fouled the British runner. The Americans refused to run the race again and the British runner took gold.

On July 25, 1908, John ran the third leg of the 4X4 1600-meter medley relay with William Hamilton, Nathaniel Cartmell (a fellow Penn alum), and Melvin Sheppard. At that time, the 1,600-meter race consisted of two runners for 200 meters, one for 400 meters (John), and one runner for 800 meters. In heat three of the first round, the American team defeated Great Britain and Canada. In the final round, they defeated Germany and Hungary. The American team won first place and John Baxter Taylor, Jr. became the first African American to win a gold medal at the Olympic Games.

Shortly after returning home to Philadelphia, John developed typhoid pneumonia. On Dec. 2, 1908, just four months after his gold medal win, John Baxter Taylor, Jr. died. He was 26 years old. John was given a grand send-off by his fellow Philadelphians as four clergymen officiated the memorial and fifty-carriages followed his hearse to its final resting place – an honor never before given to an African American in that city.

John earned forty-five cups and seventy medals during his track career. For perspective, Jesse Owens was born five years after John Taylor's death.

