

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



## Charles Richard Drew

(June 3, 1904 – April 1, 1950)

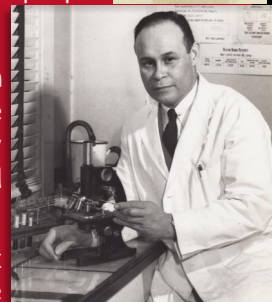
“Pioneer Doctor in Blood Transfusion and Blood Storage”

**Charles R. Drew** was born June 3, 1904 in Washington, DC. His father was a carpet layer and his mother a teacher. Charles' family lived in the interracial and middle-class community known as Foggy Bottom. Their upbringing emphasized academic education, church membership, civic knowledge, responsibility, and independence. Charles attended Dunbar High School which was one of the best college preparatory schools - for blacks or whites - in the country. He attended Amherst College in Massachusetts on an athletic scholarship for track and football and graduated in 1926. He spent the next two years at Morgan College, an



HBCU in Baltimore, as a professor of chemistry and biology, where he was also the first athletic director and football coach. Charles applied to Howard University and Harvard University, but did not have the proper prerequisites for Howard. Harvard waitlisted him for a year.

In 1929, Charles attended medical school at McGill University in Canada where he studied with anatomy professor Dr. John Beattie. Charles developed an interest in blood storage just before he graduated in 1933. In 1935, he returned to Washington D.C. and became a professor of Pathology at Howard University's medical school until 1936. He then joined the Freedman's Hospital, a federal facility associated with Howard University, as an instructor in surgery and an assistant surgeon.



In 1938, while earning a doctorate at Columbia University, Charles won a fellowship to train at Presbyterian Hospital in New York with eminent surgeon Allen Whipple. While working on research there Charles discovered that blood plasma, the pale yellow liquid without blood cells, could be stored, preserved, and used later in a medical emergency. Shortly after receiving his Doctor of Science, he was asked to direct a pilot program for collecting, testing, and distributing blood plasma in Great Britain. During the five-month program, Charles and his associates collected blood from over 15,000 people and gave about 1,500 live-saving transfusions.

With the success of the program, Charles gained international fame and was appointed director of the first American Red Cross Plasma Bank in 1941. During World War II, he recruited 100,000 blood donors for the U.S. Army and Navy. That collected blood saved the lives of thousands of wounded soldiers. Ironically, the U.S. armed forces maintained a segregated blood donation system that refused to give blood from non-whites to white soldiers. Charles denounced the policy, stating that there was no scientific evidence for separating blood based on race and soon resigned his position. He would also protest the fact that the American Medical Association and the American College of Surgeons allowed local chapters to restrict blacks from membership. He returned to Washington D.C. and became the head of Howard University's Department of Surgery and later chief surgeon at Freedman's Hospital. In 1941, Charles became the first black surgeon to serve as an examiner for the American Board of Surgery. He was invited as guest speaker at many medical conferences.



On April 1, 1950, while driving to a medical conference, Charles fell asleep at the wheel, crashing his car. Severely injured, his fellow passengers, who were also physicians, attended to Charles until he was taken to Alamance Hospital near Burlington, North Carolina, where he died a half an hour later. He was 45 years old. He left behind a wife and four young children.

Charles R. Drew has been honored with historic landmarks, medical centers, universities, bridges, and cargo ships being named after him. In 1981, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in his honor. There are currently 28 medical centers, elementary, middle, and high schools across the United States that carry his name. DeKalb County hosts one of those schools, the Charles R. Drew Charter School that opened in 2000, located off of Memorial Drive.

