

# The Clerk's Black History Series



## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



## Bessie Smith (April 15, 1894 – September 26, 1937) "Empress of the Blues"

**Bessie Smith** was born on April 15, 1894, in Chattanooga, TN. Bessie's father, William Smith died when Bessie was just a small child. A younger brother, along with her mother, Laura Owens, would die by the time Bessie was nine years old, leaving Bessie's sister Viola to raise her and her brother Clarence.

Bessie and her siblings struggled to survive. The much younger Bessie would accompany Clarence "busking" on the streets of Chattanooga. "Busking" or street performing, came natural to Bessie who would sing and dance while Clarence played the guitar. In 1904, when Bessie was just 10 years old, Clarence left to travel and perform with the Moses Stokes Company. Bessie was devastated, but continued to perform making money for the family. In 1912, Clarence returned to Chattanooga with the Stokes group and arranged an audition for Bessie. Bessie was hired as a dancer because the group already had a singer, blues legend, Ma Rainey. But Bessie also had the talent to sing and eventually moved on to performing in various chorus lines. In 1913, Bessie moved to Atlanta, establishing her reputation as a singer in the theater, "81." Her gift for singing the blues caught the attention of talent agent Frank Walker, and in 1923, Bessie was signed to Columbia Records. When Columbia established "race records," records recorded by black artists, Bessie's



song, Cemetery Blues" was the first song released on September 26, 1923. Bessie's first record "Downhearted Blues" and the B side, "Gulf Coast Blues" were big hits and earned Bessie the headliner spot on the black-owned, *Theater Owners Booking Association*, circuit. Down Hearted Blues sold a reported 780,000 copies in 1923. Bessie traveled in her own railroad car and became the highest paid black entertainer of the day. Columbia records nicknamed Bessie the "Queen of the Blues" but the press upgraded her title to "Empress of the Blues." Bessie's stardom was elevated even more with the introduction of technology when they played her songs on radio stations in the segregated South. She made 160 recording with Columbia records and was often accompanied by Blues legends such as, Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hopkins and Charlie Green. Columbia Records paid Smith an average of \$200 per recording with no royalties. By the end of the 1920's, the Great Depression started to take its toll in the recording industry, but Bessie never stopped performing. In 1929 she made her one film appearance in "St. Louis Blues." In 1933, recorded four songs for Okeh records and was paid a royalty fee of \$37.50 for each recording. These Okeh recordings would be evidence of her transformation from blues to swing music, however, they were also her last recordings.



In the early morning hours of September 26, 1937, Bessie Smith was critically injured in an automobile accident on Route 61 between Memphis, Tennessee, and Clarksdale, Mississippi. The brunt of the damage was on the passenger side of the automobile, where Bessie was seated. A doctor on the scene shortly after the accident found Bessie in the middle of the road, bloody and in shock, her right arm nearly severed. But before they could call for help, another automobile plowed down the dark highway, striking their vehicle and narrowly missing Bessie who had been moved to the side of the road. Two ambulances arrived on the scene from Clarksdale, one from the black hospital, summoned by her boyfriend who ran to a local house, the other from the white hospital, acting on a report from a truck driver passing by, who had not seen the race of the accident victims. Bessie was transported to the J.T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital, which was not the closest hospital, but was the closest black hospital. Bessie's right arm was amputated, but that wasn't enough to save her. She died that morning without ever regaining consciousness. She was buried a week later at Mount Lawn Cemetery, PA. Many questioned if Bessie would have survived her injuries had been delivered to the closet hospital, which was the whites only hospital. Bessie Smith's grave remained unmarked until August of 1970 when singer Janis Joplin and Juanita Green, a friend of Bessie's, paid for a headstone. The hospital where Bessie died was later turned into the Riverside Hotel where visitors can view the room where she died.

