



BREAKING THE CHAINS



Anthony Banks

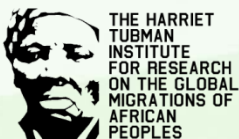
ESSEX COUNTY

Anthony Wellington Banks was the first Black police constable in Ontario.¹ He was appointed Constable of the County of Essex on April 12, 1881, by S. S. McDonnell, the Crown Attorney of Essex County. A brief biographical sketch of Banks was compiled by his granddaughter, Cordella Anne MacRae, and is located in the North American Black History Museum at Amherstburg, Ontario.

Anthony Banks was born free on June 29th 1840, in Colchester, Ontario, to Irving (Erving) Stuart Banks Sr. and Esther Malawice (Fields) Banks.² According to MacRae's account, Bank's father, Irving Banks Sr., was born in Virginia and came from a free Black family. The obituary of Anthony Bank's mother, Esther, reveals that she was born in Amherstburg, Ontario. Anthony's death certificate, registered in 1929, gives his parents names as Irwin Banks, born in Ohio, and Esther Fields, born in Amherstburg.³ The Banks family lived on a 54 acre farm on Lot 13, in the Gore of Colchester, and according to the county directory had been in Essex County since 1831. There was therefore no known history of slavery in the Banks family.⁴

One interesting story about Anthony Banks, albeit it has not been confirmed, involves the circumstances surrounding the birth of Anthony's mother, Esther (Fields) Banks. According to oral history passed on for generations in the Banks family, Esther's mother, Alamania or Amy, was born in Ghana, West Africa and was later sent to England to pursue education.⁵ While in England, Amy was employed as a cook to General Brock. Amy later migrated to Amherstburg, Canada, and it is

believed that she came to Canada with a passport.⁶





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Upon arrival in Canada, Amy worked at the Searl House, a hotel in Amherstburg. The hotel was situated on the southeast corner of Richmond and Bathurst streets, and it was there Esther was born “on June 14, 1812, the day after General Brock arrived at Amherstburg from little York to attack Detroit. As soon as General Brock was notified of the birth of Esther, he sent a bottle of wine to Amy.”⁷ Consequently, Banks family tradition has it that Esther Fields who became the wife of Anthony Banks was the daughter of General Brock. Interestingly, according to the 1851 census of Colchester there was a woman named “Almina S. Meloy” living with Irving S. Banks and his wife Esther. She was aged 18 and was born in Upper Canada. She was Esther’s daughter by her first husband, William McCoy. Was she perhaps named for her African grandmother?

The Banks family was very prominent in the Harrow/Colchester area during the 1800s and early 1900s. Aside from being the first Black constable in Canada—a position which he held for over 25 years—Anthony Banks was the first Black man to be appointed deputy game warden by the Ontario Game and Fish Commission.⁸ He was also a Bailiff, School Trustee and Treasurer and Road Master. He owned 116 acres on Lot 9 Concession 3, in South Colchester.⁹

Banks’ son, Walter Banks, also became a constable and Banks’ brother, Ervin Stuart Banks Jr., was the first African Canadian member of the Harrow Town Council.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Banks family, particularly Anthony Banks, played a leading role in the founding of the Central Grove B.M.E (British Methodist Episcopal) church in Harrow.¹¹

Anthony Banks married Susan Simpson, who was born in Harrow, Ontario, March 9th, 1845, and they had fourteen children, nine boys and five girls. They were: William Irving, Emma, Elzora, Walter, George, Martha, James, John, Gordon, Adella, Garnett, Anthony Jr. and Eli (twins), and Cora. All of Anthony and Susan’s children were born in a log cabin, owned by Anthony’s mother, Esther, except twins Eli and Anthony Jr., Cora and Garnett, who were born in the home Anthony built for his family.¹² Anthony’s son Walter, succeeded his father in the position of County Constable and lived in Colchester.

Anthony and Susan Banks were known for their personal kindness to the less fortunate. The *Essex Free Press* of





January 22, 1904, recounts the story of old “Uncle Ben” Murray, who had arrived years earlier on the Underground Railroad. When he was elderly and alone, the Banks family took him in and provided him with a loving home until he passed away at the age of 93 on January 8, 1904.

Following the death of his wife in 1909, Anthony Banks married a widow named Mrs. Katherine Rideout but no children came from this union.¹³ Anthony Banks was also a very good friend of Hiram Walker and Elijah McCoy, the inventor, who also came from Colchester.¹⁴ Anthony Banks died at the age of 89 in his farm home in Colchester, Lot 11, Concession 3, on October 17, 1929.¹⁵ He was buried on October 20, 1929, at the Central Grove Cemetery.¹⁶

¹ Found in “Anthony Banks named constable”, Document Number B3-1, North American Black Historical Museum, Amherstburg, Ontario; *Amherstburg 1796-1996: The New Town on the Garrison Grounds*. Amherstburg Bicentennial Book Committee, Amherstburg, Ontario, 1996, 244.

² “Anthony Banks (1840-1929)”. A brief biographical sketch of Banks compiled by his granddaughter, Cordella Anne MacRae, is found in Document B3-19, North American Black Historical Museum, Amherstburg, Ontario, hereafter cited as MacRae, “Anthony Banks (1840-1929)”. Check *The Amherstburg Echo*, February 10, 1899; see also *Essex Free Press*, June 19, 1920, 2 regarding a family reunion on the occasion of Anthony Banks’ 80th birthday.

³ Anthony Banks, Death Certificate, County of Essex, Colchester South, 1929, 461, Ontario, Canada, Deaths, 1869-1938 and Deaths Overseas, 1939-1947. Record for Anthony Banks, Ancestry.ca <accessed Feb. 28, 2012>

⁴ On July 16, 1835, “Esther Malawice” and “Erving Stuart Banks” were married by Reverend Richard Herrington at Regular Baptist Church in Gosfield. Thirteen children, including Anthony Banks, were born to this couple and many descendants still reside in Essex County. Found in *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 240.

⁵ *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 240.

⁶ *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 240.

⁷ *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 240.

⁸ “Anthony Banks named Game Warden,” Document Number B3-2, North American Black Historical Museum, Amherstburg, Ontario. MacRae, “Anthony Banks (1840-1929)”.

⁹ See attached County Directory entry, item B3-25 in the North American Black Historical Museum at Amherstburg, Banks Family Files.

¹⁰ *Amherstburg Echo*, February 12, 1886, “Obituary of Mary Jane Banks”. Also check Document Number B3-25, North American Black Historical Museum, Amherstburg, Ontario. This was the listing in the County Atlas of 1881, which states that Ervin Banks Jr. was a member of the Harrow Township Council, and owned 150 acres of Lot 16, Con S.N.R, N Colchester valued at \$5000. See also MacRae, “Anthony Banks (1840-1929)”.

¹¹ MacRae, “Anthony Banks (1840-1929)”. Most members of the Banks family, including Anthony, were buried at the Central Grove B.M.E cemetery. Check *Amherstburg Echo*, February 10th, 1899, “Obituary of Mrs. Esther Banks and grandson, Will Banks,”

¹² MacRae, “Anthony Banks (1840-1929)”. Also check Document Number B3-18, North American Black Historical Museum, Amherstburg, Ontario.

¹³ MacRae, “Anthony Banks (1840-1929)”, also check Document Number B3-18, North American Black Historical Museum, Amherstburg, Ontario.

¹⁴ MacRae, “Anthony Banks (1840-1929)”.

¹⁵ *Amherstburg 1796-1996: The New Town on the Garrison Grounds: Amherstburg Bicentennial Book Committee*, Amherstburg, Ontario, 1996, 240.

¹⁶ Anthony Banks, Death Certificate, County of Essex, Colchester South, 1829, 461, Ontario, Canada, Deaths, 1869-1938 and Deaths Overseas, 1939-1947 Record for Anthony Banks, Ancestry.ca <accessed Feb. 28, 2012>

