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### Albert Harold Banks

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Jarred Cantu

Albert Harold Banks

Texas A&M San Antonio

Professor Barragan

One thing is certain for the history of San Antonio; the African American community has had a little spotlight shined on them throughout. Today San Antonio has many different cultures throughout where ideas are all mixed together in 460 plus square miles of land according to the 2010 census.<sup>1</sup> For obvious reasons, San Antonio didn't become this way overnight. Throughout its history we have seen its fair share of many races coming over and setting up new homes here; more so in the African American community. Until recently we have only begun to understand what this community has brought in the city thanks to the San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum. We have been introduced to settlement patterns, civil rights movements, as well as spotlights on sports such as cycling and baseball that the African American community has given San Antonio.

One thing that definitely needed a little more attention in the history of African Americans in Bexar County was the small business owners; especially in the early 1900s where having a free life was not a luxury for most African Americans in post-Civil War United States. African Americans were free from slavery but living amongst their white counterparts; they still dealt with racism and segregation. I specifically looked into barbershops because for most of my life I have spent a good amount of time in barber shops to notice a thing or two about the business and what it means to a community. Even in today's society barbershops are used as a place to congregate especially in the African American community. Before the 1930s, there were a number of barbershops with ads in the *San Antonio Light*, and the *San Antonio Express News*, but aside from these advertisements, there are not many sources available on them. The *San*

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: San Antonio City, Texas." Census Bureau QuickFacts. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sanantoniocitytexas/POP060210>.

*Antonio Register*, a Black newspaper founded in 1931 offered a little more insight.<sup>2</sup> In this publication I found the name Albert Harold Banks. The name is nothing that pops up immediately in popular search forms such as Google or Bing but luckily though I was able to find this gentleman by chance. I was intrigued by him because he was exactly what I was looking for: an African American small business owner. Having a haircut in today's society is an art. You see different hairstyles and at times it can tell a story for the individuals wearing such a style. Now I didn't come to Banks to find out what hairstyles he was giving customers although it would be interesting to know; I came to find Banks to discover a little bit more of the life of an African American business owner in the middle of a Jim Crow society. What I came to learn was that Banks was more than just a person cutting hair for the community. He was involved in many endeavors for the community such as theater. Banks was heavily involved in taking parts in plays thrown by the San Antonio Little Negro Theater movement. Banks also helped with the grooming community by starting a barber association in which he was the president. With this information, it led me to many questions. Why aren't people such as Banks recognized at a bigger picture in history? How was he able to be successful at owning a small business such as barbershop during the Jim Crow era? Did his other endeavors set him apart from the rest as a prominent man in San Antonio?

*Cutting Along the Color Line* by Quincy T. Mills and *Stages of Struggle and Celebration* by Sandra Mayo and Elvin Holt provide a clearer picture of who Banks was and how he provided much more than grooming services to the city of San Antonio. Mills gives out a detailed look into black-owned barbershops in two different eras. One, in the years 1830 to 1920 focusing in on how slavery had a major impact on owning a barbershop. Two, focusing on the

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<sup>2</sup> "San Antonio Register." The Portal to Texas History. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/SANR/>.

20<sup>th</sup> century where we find a changing narrative in how black-owned barbershops are run. Mayo and Holt write about the black theater movements in Texas and give out a very detailed look on San Antonio's movement. They even put some focus on the *San Antonio Little Negro Theater* of which Albert Banks was a member. Both books have their own arguments that help my research along the way. Mills argues that the landscape of barbering for African Americans was changing from the 1800s to the early 1900s due to the movement of slavery to freedom to Jim Crow. He also explores the time of when barbershops were changing into businesses to places to congregate in the black community which was gained from economic freedom in the black community. Holt and Mayo is acknowledged as much more of a comprehensive historical narrative.<sup>3</sup> They understand that there has been other work on theater movements specifically in major cities such as New York or Chicago. This book is one of the first of its kind to focus in on Texas. The historiography is stated clearly that they take several different approaches to understand the Texas black theater movement. They focus in on the social and cultural institutions of the theaters, the role of the individuals, and focus on the performances as seen by the audience.

In the case of Albert Harold Banks, I argue that even though he is considered just a small businessman, he was very important in San Antonio's upbringing and researching his life provides an excellent study into San Antonio's history. This paper is broken down into three different sections. One, I look into Banks' work as a barber and how it was his first platform to becoming a prominent member in society. Two, I present Banks' numerous works with the theater and how he represented himself as a respectable person in San Antonio. I also show how much theater was widely popular in San Antonio and that it helped Banks to become a public

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<sup>3</sup> Sandra Marie Mayo and Elvin Holt, *Stages of Struggle and Celebration: A Production History of Black Theatre in Texas*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 7

figure. Third, I look at Banks' Colored Master Barber Association as well as other ways he helped the community for good.<sup>4</sup> Although there are very little resources on this, with the small bit of information I can present a portrayal of Banks and show that he meant more for the community than a small business owner. In the end I will give a representation to a person lost in history. I will give an understanding to this lost history while at the same time give a better representation to the grassroots history of San Antonio.

### **Barbering**

I found early on in 1918 that Banks got started off with barbering in San Antonio with *Empire Barb Shop*.<sup>5</sup> The directory states that this is his place of occupation but does not specifically state that he is the owner. It still tells a great deal of how Banks got started with barbering early. In order to understand Banks early involvement in barbering, we need to examine the time before him. Mills states that between the years of 1830 and 1865, barbering opened a much-needed economic mobility for African American slaves.<sup>6</sup> Plantation work was not the only jobs that slaves endured in their time of servitude. Grooming white masters was a task the slaves had to do, and it created a safe haven for them to get out of the boiling sun. This haven was not only for slaves but, it was also a great opportunity for free blacks. Before the Civil War, the ratio of free Blacks was skewed in favor of slavery, but the low numbers of free Blacks used barbering as one of the occupations to create capital for themselves. It was one of the few jobs free blacks could hold without much bother from the elite whites. This was also only

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<sup>4</sup> "Organizer of C.M.B.A." San Antonio Register, September 1, 1933, 1 edition.  
<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth390218/m1/6/?q=barber>.

<sup>5</sup> Ancestry.com. U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 17.

because free blacks would mostly groom white men. With barbering, when the white men were gone, free blacks or slaves could have a space to discourse about independence and freedom.<sup>7</sup> In a time where African Americans were treated less than animals, the slaves, as well as the free blacks had a place of unstable security where they could congregate if they could and have a time to speak their minds. The society they were living in turned them away from freedoms such as these and African Americans used this to their advantage. Due to this newfound cultural for African Americans, it can be understandable that Banks continued its legacy of African American barbering community.

What I find most important about the time of barbering during the slavery era is the way blacks looked at barbershops as places to congregate. In the turn of the century, a change was on the horizon for black barbers. In the time of pre-and post-Civil War, many black barbers catered to the white middle or upper class. For reasons already stated, white men had a certain hold on black barbershops, an example of how barbershops were a way to reinforce racial and class identities.<sup>8</sup> In the new century Mills states, "...this generation of "New Negro" barbers began to focus on the internal needs and wants of the black communities, in the process becoming significant fixtures in those communities."<sup>9</sup>Banks was born in this generation and is proved to be this term of "New Negro" barber.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jim Crow era, Banks found out how much he could cater to the free African Americans. The hold was not as tight anymore and the *San Antonio Register* would go on to prove this. In numerous ads, Banks was one of the top barbers to see. In an October 1933 issue of the *Register*, Banks was considered the "most unique parlor in town."<sup>10</sup> In another ad,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 146

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 147

<sup>10</sup> "A. Harold Banks." *San Antonio Register*, October 13, 1933

Banks gave a holiday cheer to his family and patrons.<sup>11</sup> These recognitions of Banks and his business tell us how much he was fond in the community. It is easy to have an ad in the paper, but what made him stand out is his picture plastered in these pages for many to see. Although they are just ads, they still tell a story. The *Register* was known as an African American publication, and in this new turn of the century black barbers were now freely cutting hair of black patrons. Banks' shop was used for grooming services but also a place to congregate. His name was advertised numerous of times in the *Register* allowing for open doors to anyone wanting a haircut and possibly a conversation. His success came from the "New Negro" barbers that were born in his time. Banks was a product of the changing landscape of African Americans living and barbering more freely. This would lead Banks to own a good number of barbershops set mainly on the eastside of downtown San Antonio.

Banks did not just stop with barbering as being a part of the community. He let his skills as a businessman and as a "chirotonser", to lead him into other ventures.<sup>12</sup> Despite his success as a Black barber, Banks' true calling may have been the theater. Although his love for grooming/cutting hair is what kept him going; he found another love with it. The barbershop business is not as a heavy toll job compared to working in the oil fields. Many barbers even today have other side jobs to either keep them busy with another paycheck or a hobby. I currently get my haircut with my barber who also runs a construction business on the side. The versatile occupation of barbering allows for this. It is not a nerve-racking career which can allow for other ways to spend time. Banks chose to spend some time in the theater and with many resources, he could of truly be more known as Albert Harold Banks the actor rather than Albert Harold Banks the barber.

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<sup>11</sup> San Antonio Register, December 22, 1933

<sup>12</sup> "A. Harold Banks." San Antonio Register, October 13, 1933



## Theater

Perhaps his biggest art was not one who cuts hair but giving performances that one critic described as rising “to heights unknown.”<sup>13</sup> When the *Register* began to operate is when they documented most of Banks’ performances in San Antonio, which suggests that Banks’ was a prominent member of society before the newspaper was founded. The Library Auditorium was where Banks’ gave most of his performances and if the black theater movement was not a success then his performances may have not seen the light of day.

Banks was able to get his start with the *San Antonio Little Negro Theater Movement*.<sup>14</sup> When this movement emerged, it was helped by the Hemmings Players which consisted of Myra Hemmings and her husband John W. Hemmings. This all began with Myra’s inspiration from the Harlem Renaissance which influenced the rise of a theater movement in San Antonio. The group became widely popular in the city, putting on multiple plays for the community at the Library Auditorium. This new movement grew rapidly in San Antonio, as it directly correlated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. This movement brought a new intellectual and artistic way of life for African Americans and 1930s San Antonio was proof of this. Myra was a big help in this with her clever choice of plays she would produce.<sup>15</sup> Much like Mills statement about the “New Negro” barbers, the negro theater movement allowed for African Americans to be a part of something artistic and to do so on their own terms. The biggest takeaway from this new movement is that it was compromised of everyday people such as Banks’. Some of the plays did have theater actors but for the most part it was about community involvement. Banks’ himself was an advocate of this with his heavy involvement.

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<sup>13</sup> “The Echo.” San Antonio Register, November 20, 1931

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Marie Mayo and Elvin Holt. *Stages of Struggle and Celebration: A Production History of Black Theatre in Texas*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 30

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 38

If it wasn't for the African American theater movement happening in a time when Banks was thriving in San Antonio, then San Antonio may have never gotten a taste of Banks versatility. Luckily, San Antonio benefited from this movement in a great way that served the African American community. For Banks we discover his true meaning to the community. In the years of production when Banks took part in the theater movement, the *Register* mentions his name 6 times. 4 times in 1931, 1 in 1933 and 1 in 1936; each either introducing the production happening soon or a review of a previous production. What stands out the most is how much the productions were highly notable. Most of them were not just information on start times of the productions, but were information on the actors, actresses, and the story more-so when Banks was a part of the production. In one of the ads for "The Brat", Banks was mentioned that the city would recognize him "at his true word."<sup>16</sup> The editor was describing his ability to play his part well. Although his name was not plastered on every newspaper, with his good amount of recognition, Banks truly meant more to the community than just a barber.

Although, African Americans still had trouble brewing with radical racism, there was a sense of change coming with the black theater movement. It didn't happen completely when Banks was making a name for himself, but he definitely was doing his best to help change the quality of life for African Americans. Banks did not just leave his barbering skills to himself. He would provide his service and get paid for it, but he also provided much more. He had his theater in which would give his art to the community, while he also had his business of grooming. Those two actions were more than enough to give back to whoever was willing to witness, but his community work did not end there. He wanted to find other ways to do something for change, and he did so with the sharing of his skills.

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<sup>16</sup> "The Echo." San Antonio Register, November 20, 1931, 1 edition.

## Organization

In September of 1933, Albert Banks discovered another calling that would give back to other barbers of the city. He started the Colored Master Barber Association in which he was the president of the organization. The idea for the organization was to improve the order of barbers and barbershops.<sup>17</sup> He held meetings throughout the city at other barbershops to help expand the life of a barbershop. With the start of this organization, Banks needed to find a way to make sure barbershops stayed open for business in the community. This was his agenda for the C.M.B.A. He knew the hardships of owning and running a barbershop, and to help others survive in a time where Africans Americans had small opportunities. This was the perfect man for the job. According to the *Register*, “He is a master barber, owns and operates one of the most unique and modern equipped shops of his group...”<sup>18</sup> In every effort to try to encourage the African Americans of the city of San Antonio to thrive far past their expectations, Banks was more than willing to help wherever he could. It is this type of encouragement that also led him to give back in another way.

In the year before Banks started the C.M.B.A, he also took part in programs for hairdressers. Very similar to his work with the organization he started, but this involved the entire community of barbers and hairdressers alike. In May of 1932, Banks took part in the “First Annual Program of the San Antonio Hair Dresser Association.”<sup>19</sup> The program took place on a Sunday at a community church in eastside San Antonio. The program followed along the Sunday service with several people a part of the program giving readings related to hair dressing. Banks

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<sup>17</sup> “Organizer of C.M.B.A.” San Antonio Register, September 1, 1933

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, “Organizer of C.M.B.A

<sup>19</sup> “First Annual Program of the San Antonio Hair Dressers Association at Lincoln Park Church of Christ.” San Antonio Register, May 20, 1932

was a part of this program and gave a reading for the service on “Temptation of a Barber”<sup>20</sup> For barbers and hair dressers, there was an understanding that they needed to band together. Banks was all for this by participating in the community like he always had been. This is another take of how he spent his time to give back to the community by offering his services for the ones around him. His reading was about temptation which Oxford defines as the desire to do something whether it was good or bad.<sup>21</sup> The temptation to do something with this master skill and how barbers or hair dressers can improve themselves in the process. If the program needed anyone to speak that day it would be Banks because at this point in his life, there is an understanding that he had seen what barbering can do to a community.

Banks work with the community, such as his organization as well as his help with other organizations has set him apart from being an everyday person. His many endeavors such as the C.M.B.A or the Hairdressers Association put him at a socioeconomic level that many African Americans would not be at. Banks was all for improving himself as well as the people around him. With the landscape of 1930s United States, African Americans were trying to find their place in society much as what Banks was doing. There was no looking back at the old days where African Americans opportunity was little to none and now with the turn of the century many African Americans such as Banks were more than willing to prove that they had much more to offer then what their white counter parts believed they had. The only way was up from there on out and Banks was living proof of this.

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<sup>20</sup> “First Annual Program of the San Antonio Hair Dressers Association at Lincoln Park Church of Christ.” San Antonio Register, May 20, 1932

<sup>21</sup> Temptation: Definition of Temptation by Lexico. (n.d.).

## Conclusion

Albert Harold Banks is a person who on paper has every qualification on who gets remembered in history. Social history according to Merriam Webster is history that concentrates upon the social, economic, and cultural institutions of a people.<sup>22</sup> Compared to popular histories such as war or cultural history, social history can be just as intriguing especially when you find people such as Banks who have been lost in time but have everything needed to be remembered. The approach in this research was to find out what an everyday person did to qualify. Truth of the matter is that we can't remember everyone in our history unless used popularly such as a statistic for who owned barbershops in the early 1900s San Antonio. That is why social history at times is very specific in who or what is written about. It's easy to remember the Alamo rather to remember a barbershop owner in 1930s San Antonio.

Banks was living proof that social history is a big part of any history in general. He had huge impact in the San Antonio's African American community, and we should remember him as such. The approach was to look at what he did and understand that he was just an everyday person. Through his work as an y barber and barbershop owner where he emphasized his grooming of the black community when they needed it the most. Through his community activism where he participated in many plays that showed how much creativity and art the black community had and still has till this day. To his work with the community of improving barbershop and hairdresser businesses to ensure that they had a long and prosperous life. Albert Harold Banks did more than enough to ensure that he was providing grooming services, helped sustain the art community, while also making sure the legacy of the barber would live on during the time of the Great Depression. Banks allowed for barbers to not only sharpen their craft but to

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<sup>22</sup> "Social History." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 2, 2020. [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social history](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20history).

enable them to venture out into other endeavors that would benefit the community. At the same time, Banks is a great figure to the future generation of barbers or for anyone trying to find their way.

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	 <b>CHIROTENSOR</b> Most unique parlor in town Where the discriminating come to be well groomed. 630 N. New Braunfels Avenue "WE DO OUR PART"

<p>A Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year to my many friends and patrons <b>A. HAROLD BANKS</b> Chirotonsor 630 N. New Braunfels Ave.</p>	
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