

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry

Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

James Andrew Harris

(March 26, 1932 – December 12, 2000)

“First Black Nuclear Chemist to Discover an Element”



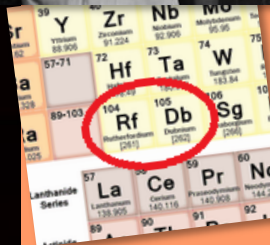
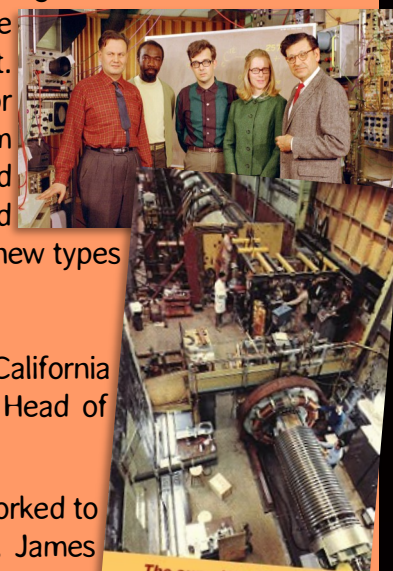
James Andrew Harris was born in Waco, Texas on March 26, 1932. His parents divorced when he was in middle school and he and his mother moved to Oakland, California, where he graduated from high school. James returned to Texas to attend Huston-Tillotson College (HBCU), where he earned degrees in Chemistry and Physics in 1953. After college, James struggled to find work in the 1950's, so he joined the U.S. Army.



After returning to civilian life in 1955, James had difficulty finding a job after the military. Employers were hesitant to hire him and questioned his education and abilities. At one job interview, James was given a basic elementary math test. Another job thought he was applying to be the janitor. Undeterred, James applied to Tracerlabs in Richmond, California where he worked as a researcher.



Five years later, in 1960, James took a research position in the Nuclear Chemistry department at the University of California's, Berkeley's Lawrence Radiation Laboratory (today commonly called the Berkeley Lab), working in the isotope division. James began working with a team of scientists that set out to find or produce new elements. In addition to being the only person of color on the team, James was also the only chemist. James, along with the other researchers discovered new elements for the periodic table - rutherfordium (element 104) in 1969 and dubnium (element 105) in 1970. The research team relied on a one-of-a-kind tool—the Super Heavy Ion Linear Accelerator. The Accelerator used high electric current injectors to bombard targets, which resulted in new types of mass, and thus the “superheavy” elements.



In 1975, James received a master's degree in public administration from California State University, Hayward. In 1977, he was promoted to head of the Head of Engineering and Technical Services Division at Lawrence.

After receiving national recognition because of his discoveries, James worked to ensure that other black children could enjoy the same opportunities. James traveled to schools and universities across the nation to talk to young black students, especially those from disadvantaged communities, and recruit them to the sciences. His dedication led to awards from the Urban League, the National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers, the City of Richmond, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Black Dignity Science Institute, and the National Organization for Equal Opportunity in Education. James was even part of the "Black Pioneers" exhibit at the Oakland Museum, and was inducted into the Black College Hall of Fame in Atlanta.

James retired early in 1988 at the age of fifty-six. In his retirement he kept up with his community service efforts, along with many rounds of golf, and spending time with Helen and his five children. James Andrew Harris passed away on December 12, 2000, from an unknown but sudden illness.

