

# Alexander(s) the Great

By: [R. Marc Kantrowitz](#) February 17, 2022



When Ferdinando Alfonsi died on Oct. 27, 1938, his wife, Stella, was charged with his murder. As she quickly grew tired of her attorney, she petitioned the court to have the highly regarded and talented Raymond Pace Alexander represent her. It was not surprising that she wanted him in her corner. He was, after all, impressive. At 6-foot-3, he possessed a lean runner's physique and carried himself with confidence, grace and charm.

Stella's request, however, was highly unusual and set tongues wagging in the staid Philadelphia courtroom and local legal community. Despite the talent of Alexander, Black lawyers just didn't handle capital cases, especially not ones involving a white defendant and victim. Despite the overwhelming evidence against his client, Alexander, believing — like John Adams — that all criminal defendants were entitled to representation notwithstanding the stench of the crime, agreed to take the case. It would turn out to be yet another first in a lifetime of firsts, enhanced by his securing a not-guilty verdict.

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Raymond Pace Alexander was born in 1897 to hardworking parents, Hillard and Virginia, who were born into slavery. Seeking both economic opportunity and an escape from the continuing oppression of their southern environs, they emigrated to Philadelphia. There they found a modicum of success until Virginia died of pneumonia in 1909. Feeling unable to adequately care for his four children, Hillard asked Virginia's brother and his wife to watch them. The working-class family agreed. With a large household to help support, Alexander, despite his young age, worked various jobs to bring in needed income.

One job in particular helped mold him. Working in an opera house revealed a world of culture, class and style, all traits he readily sopped up, adding to what he learned in school, where he also excelled. He graduated as class valedictorian. Receiving a merit scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, he would go on to the Wharton School of Business, where he became its first Black graduate. Harvard Law School followed. In his spare time, he took summer courses at Columbia, all the while working to support himself.

When he graduated, Alexander initially had difficulties finding employment in his chosen field, due to discrimination. He finally did but soon left to start his own practice, which, not surprisingly, thrived. Representing a woman found guilty of murder, he secured a new trial that ended with an acquittal. He also sued a local movie theater that refused to admit Blacks. In 1929, he took on a case in which two Black amateur golfers were disqualified on trumped up charges.

Three years later, in 1932, he joined the fight to integrate the local schools of Berwyn, part of Philadelphia's Main Line suburbs. A boycott and marches over a two-year period proved successful. Soon, landmark equal rights legislation passed, thanks to him, his wife and others, opening access to public schools, restaurants and hotels. As Alexander's prominence spread, he traveled the nation, speaking on racial tolerance and equality.

In 1948, "the Trenton Six" were charged with robbing and killing an elderly furniture store owner. They were convicted and given death sentences. The NAACP, at the request of its general counsel, Thurgood Marshall, asked Alexander

to help with the appeal. The convictions were overturned. At the re-trial, Alexander was instrumental in exposing manufactured evidence and coerced confessions. Ultimately, four were acquitted.

Expanding his horizons, Alexander ran for City Council and was elected and then re-elected, serving from 1952 to 1959. He stressed civil rights, civil service reform, merit hiring, and increased minority job representation. He left when he was appointed a judge on the Court of Common Pleas, the first African-American so named, and served until 1974.

While on the bench, he created a diversion program for first-time offenders and helped establish the city's Community Legal Services program. At all times, he reportedly treated those appearing before him, especially the poor and oppressed, with respect and fairness.

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There were few people at the time, indeed even today, who possessed the gravitas of Raymond Pace Alexander. One, however, who matched, if not surpassed, his brilliance was his wife, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander.

Sadie came from an impressive family whose members boasted a litany of racial firsts: Her Uncle Nathan Francis Mossell was the first to graduate from UPenn's Medical School; her Uncle Henry Ossawa Tanner was the first to gain international acclaim as an artist; her Aunt Halle was the first to practice medicine in Alabama and found the Nurses' School and Hospital at the Tuskegee Institute; her Uncle Louis Baxter Moore was the first to receive a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania; and her father was the first to graduate from UPenn's law school.

Sadie herself would also go to UPenn, where she met Alexander, and graduated in three years. She continued her studies and became not only the first African-American in the country to receive a Ph.D. in economics, but the first Black woman to receive a law degree from her prestigious school.

Not surprisingly, she made law review, breaking yet another barrier. She joined her husband's law practice, and in doing so became the first African-American woman to practice law in Pennsylvania.

Notwithstanding Sadie's almost unbelievable accomplishments, she frequently encountered overt racism, not only in school but wherever she and her husband went. Battling it became their life's ambition, with some setbacks and many major victories.

Recognizing her abilities, reputation and successes, President Truman named her to his Committee on Civil Rights. Later, she served as an early commissioner on Philadelphia's Commission on Human Relations.

In tribute to her accomplishments, an elementary school in Philadelphia carries her name, the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander Partnership School, informally known as the Penn Alexander School. The "partnership" is one between the local school district, the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. The well-regarded state-of-the-art school holds its students to the highest academic standards. In another honor, her law school established the Raymond Pace and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander Chair in Civil Rights.

### **Epilogue**

Raymond died in 1974 at 77, Sadie in 1989 at 91, leaving behind, after 51 years of marriage, their two daughters and an inspiring legacy.

At Sadie's funeral, one speaker intoned that she was "proof that people can overcome any obstacle, so long as they don't suffer from the worst kind of poverty of all, poverty of the spirit.... I will miss her always."

As well we all should.

*The above column is based, in part, on "Poison Widows" by George Cooper and other internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz is a retired Appeals Court judge. He can be contacted at Rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.*