

**KNOCKING DOWN DOORS:**  
**The Trailblazing Life of**  
**SADIE TANNER MOSSELL ALEXANDER,**  
**Pennsylvania's First Black Woman Lawyer**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

“I knew well that the only way I could get that door open was to knock it down; because I knocked all of them down.”<sup>1</sup>

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander spent the majority of her long life knocking down the doors of elitist white male-dominated institutions and professions that tried unsuccessfully to exclude her. A true pioneer, she knocked down the doors of the University of Pennsylvania to earn four degrees. Alexander earned a bachelor of science degree, a master’s in economics and in 1921 became the first black woman in the United States to earn a Ph.D. in economics. In 1927, she became the first black woman to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania School of Law as well as the first black woman to gain admission to the Pennsylvania Bar. Alexander also knocked down the doors of municipal and federal government when she became the first black woman Assistant City Solicitor in Philadelphia in 1928 and when President Harry S. Truman chose her as the first black woman to be named to a presidential commission. Throughout her fifty-six year legal career, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander fought for the civil and human rights of all members of society and refused to let any roadblocks impede her work. When Alexander provided encouraging words to other young black women and men, she spoke from experience: “Don’t let anything stop you. There will be times when you’ll be disappointed, but you can’t stop. Make yourself the best that you can make out of what you are. The very best.”<sup>2</sup>

As a student of women's legal history, I first discovered Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander in my efforts to unearth more about the struggle of African American women to be admitted to the bar and the seemingly insurmountable double burden of racism and sexism that these women overcame to succeed in the practice of law. I wondered how these women's extraordinary tales of determination and passion for justice might inform my work as a black woman lawyer embarking on the twenty-first century. I was particularly drawn to Alexander because of our common history. Like Alexander, my family has lived in Pennsylvania for generations, and much of my source of strength derives from keeping alive a knowledge of and respect for the efforts of black Pennsylvanians in American history. In Sadie Alexander's words and in her story, I found lessons of truth, perseverance, and a passion for justice that have inspired me as I hope they will and have inspired others.

This paper will first discuss the historical and social context in which Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander was educated and began practicing law. By understanding the status of blacks and women who practiced law in the early part of the century, and the glaring paucity of black women lawyers, we gain a better understanding of the obstacles Alexander faced in her education and her work. The second section of the paper examines the impact that Alexander's family history--the achievements of the Tanners and the Mossells--had on her decision to practice law. The third section depicts her early life and education, while the final section underlines some of the most significant work of a legal career that lasted over fifty years.

## II. BLACK AND WOMEN LAWYERS IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA

### A. The “Black Bar”

There is relatively little known about the first black lawyers in the United States, but the first record of an African American admitted to the bar is in 1844, when Macon Bolling Allen was admitted to the state bar of Maine.<sup>3</sup> Thus, even before the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery in 1865, and the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, the “black lawyer had already taken his place in society.”<sup>4</sup> From the time of Allen’s admittance until Reconstruction, there were only a handful of black men and no black women admitted to the bar.<sup>5</sup> During Reconstruction, however, blacks entered the legal profession in increasing numbers. This may be due in part to the founding of the foremost black law school in the United States, Howard University Law School in Washington, D.C. in 1869.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the bar examination replaced sponsorship as the requirement for admittance to the bar.<sup>7</sup> This may have offered blacks who had no white lawyer to sponsor them an opportunity to gain admission.

In post-Reconstruction years, the South closed their doors to blacks in professional ranks through the enactment of Black Codes and African Americans faced dwindling opportunities in the law as a possible profession and as an avenue to eradicate racial inequities. Historian, lawyer, and former Chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission J. Clay Smith, Jr. notes that black lawyers were actually “one of the last group of professionals to emerge as a class in the black community.”<sup>8</sup> White

lawyers did not view black lawyers as a threat because of their small numbers, and blacks often chose black lawyers to represent them only as a last resort.<sup>9</sup> One noted Philadelphia scholar determined that black lawyers had even fewer opportunities than black physicians:

[T]he Negro clergymen and physicians . . . practically have the practice of their people, but not so the Negro lawyer. He is still a pioneer and at a disadvantage, in that his practice is not private, or among his own people, but he must plead before a white judge often against a white lawyer and generally with a white jury . . . . The average Negro . . . knowing how great a handicap the lawyer of his race suffers in that section, hesitates long before employing a Negro lawyer.<sup>10</sup>

Still, by the 1920s black lawyers were increasing in small but significant numbers. In 1890, there were 431 black lawyers in the United States. By 1920, shortly before Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander enrolled in law school, the number of black lawyers increased to 950, a 120 percent increase.<sup>11</sup> In 1940, there were approximately 1,925 black lawyers in this country. In other words, there was only one black lawyer for every 13,000 black persons.<sup>12</sup> Within two decades, the number of black lawyers doubled. However, relative to the total number of lawyers, black lawyers increased only from 0.6 percent to 1 percent.<sup>13</sup>

## **B. Paucity of Black Women in the Law**

[T]he Negro has few ideals and perhaps no lasting adherence to an aspiration toward real worth . . . . He has little conception of the meaning of virtue, truth, honor . . . . The Negro woman constitutes a serious feature of the situation. She fails to assist the men in a better struggle, she is inefficient and indisposed to be faithful. She is a hindrance to the saving of money and the industrial development of the family."<sup>14</sup>

The slow and sometimes unsteady increase of blacks in the legal profession was comprised almost exclusively of black men. While black men faced the oppressive burden of racial discrimination and white women faced the stigma of sexism, black women faced the double burden of racism and sexism. As the above quotation from a Columbia University doctoral student's dissertation points out, black women in early twentieth century America bore the brunt of all racial and gender stereotypes. One historian notes: "inevitably, the Negro girl suffered more deprivation than her brothers. If a white woman was supposed to be mentally incapable of receiving the same education as a man, and Negroes were inferior to whites, it followed that the Negro girl had the least possible potential for mental growth."<sup>15</sup>

Even with these obstacles, black women began entering the practice of law shortly after the passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. The earliest known African American woman law graduate was Charlotte A. Ray, who graduated from Howard University Law School in 1872. She was also the first to be before the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, where she is now reputed to have been the first black woman admitted to practice.<sup>16</sup>

Women of all races entered the legal profession in increasing numbers by the beginning of the twentieth century. Most women faced fewer rigid institutional and legal barriers than in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> By 1910, there were 558 women lawyers in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Ten years later, "every state bar was open to women, all but twenty-seven of 129 law schools admitted women, and the suffrage amendment made women full and equal citizens."<sup>19</sup> There were 1,738 women lawyers, and an additional 1,171 women

enrolled in law school.<sup>20</sup> There were 3,385 women lawyers by 1930,<sup>21</sup> three years after Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander was admitted to the Pennsylvania bar.

Black women, however, continued to face institutional barriers in their efforts to enter the practice. Black women comprised less than two percent of female lawyers in 1900.<sup>22</sup> From 1872 to 1930, there were only twenty-two black women lawyers identified.<sup>23</sup> As Paula Giddings notes in her seminal work on the history of black women in the United States, When and Where I Enter, there has traditionally been a higher percentage of black women in the work force than white women out of financial necessity.<sup>24</sup> In 1920, for example, close to forty percent of black women worked compared to only seventeen percent of white women. The fact that black women were such an insignificant portion of the ranks of women lawyers in the early twentieth century can be viewed as a true testament to the double burden of racial and sexual oppression that they faced. In Sadie Alexander's hometown of Philadelphia, black women were almost nonexistent. There is no record of any black woman gaining admission to the Pennsylvania bar for at least eighteen years after Sadie Alexander gained admission.<sup>25</sup>

### C. The Philadelphia Story

Though the first black lawyer was admitted to the Pennsylvania bar in 1865,<sup>26</sup> by the end of the nineteenth century, there were only ten practicing black male lawyers in Philadelphia.<sup>27</sup> Only two of these men were considered "successful practitioners."<sup>28</sup> The most significant increase in the number of black male lawyers in admitted to the Pennsylvania bar seems to have taken place between 1920 and 1930. While there were 24

black male lawyers in Pennsylvania in 1920, the number increased to 48 by 1930.<sup>29</sup> From 1933 to 1945, only five black lawyers were admitted to the Philadelphia Bar.<sup>30</sup> Still, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander remained the only black woman lawyer in the state for some time. And from 1909 to 1945, only twenty black lawyers--Sadie Alexander being the only female--were admitted to the Philadelphia Bar.<sup>31</sup>

### **III. SADIE TANNER MOSSELL ALEXANDER: A FAMILY TREE**

#### **A. The Tanners and Mossells: Families of Firsts**

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander's ancestry helped to prepare her to be a pioneer black woman lawyer and role model for political, social, and economic justice. She was proud of her family history, and spoke often of how her prominent Philadelphia family served as her anchor and her source of inspiration.

Both the Tanners and Mossells were highly accomplished families. Sadie Alexander is in the fifth generation of the Tanner family recorded in the United States census as "free Negroes." The Tanners include several generations of activists who, beginning in the 1700s fought for racial justice first in Pittsburgh and later in Philadelphia.<sup>32</sup> At the turn of the century, the Tanner home "was a gathering place and intellectual center for the Black community."<sup>33</sup> Alexander's maternal grandfather, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, was ordained as a Bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1860. A prolific writer, he also founded the *A.M.E. Church Review* in 1848, the country's first African American scholarly journal, and published several books.<sup>34</sup>

Alexander's maternal grandmother, Sarah (Sadie) Elizabeth Miller, was born into slavery in 1840.<sup>35</sup> Her family escaped to Pennsylvania, where she wed Benjamin Tucker Tanner.<sup>36</sup>

The Tanners had seven children, and many of them broke through racial and gender barriers to become legends in their own fields. One of their sons, Henry Ossawa Tanner, became a famous painter.<sup>37</sup> Alexander's aunt Hallie Tanner Johnson was a graduate of the Women's Medical College and the first woman, of any race, to be admitted to practice medicine in Alabama. In addition, she established the Nurses' School and Hospital at Tuskegee Institute of Alabama? Sadie's mother was Mary Louise Tanner. Speaking of the Tanner family, Alexander stressed the importance that education had on her mother and her own upbringing:

[M]y mother . . . was educated. She'd been around books all of her life and they were a part of her. My grandfather had two huge rooms with books up to the ceiling . . . I was brought up in that atmosphere . . . . With this background, it wasn't anything . . . it was just supposed that you went to college. It wasn't anything unusual, it was to be expected.<sup>39</sup>

Alexander's struggle for racial and gender equality can also be traced to the struggles and achievements of her father's family, the Mossells. Both of her paternal grandparents were "free Negroes" who refused to have any children born into slave territory. As a result, they sold their brick house and brickyard in Baltimore and moved to Hamilton, Ontario to raise three sons and a daughter.<sup>40</sup> It was only after Emancipation that the Mossells moved back to the United States, and settled in Lockport, New York. There, Alexander's grandfather, having donated all the brick for the building of the town's

public school, argued successfully against segregated education and enrolled his children as the first black Americans in an integrated school in the town.<sup>41</sup> All three boys later attended and received degrees from Lincoln University. Alexander's uncle, Nathan Francis Mossell, is reputedly the first black graduate from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. A trained surgeon, he co-founded Philadelphia's Frederick Douglass Hospital in 1895. Nathan Mossell married Gertrude E.H. Bustill, author of a black feminist publication called *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*, a collection of original essays and poems.<sup>42</sup> Alexander grew up hearing the struggles of her grandparents and uncles and used these as lessons for her own life. "[M]y background . . . prepared me to face opposition with strong determination to attain my goal but without spending time or energy on my rancor."<sup>43</sup> Hence, Sadie Alexander first gained her superior survival skills as a child growing up in the midst of a family of African American trailblazers.

### **B. Like Father, Like Daughter**

In her article on the "new woman lawyer" of early twentieth-century America, Virginia Drachman notes that the few black women who became lawyers were for the most part, like Sadie Alexander, part of the privileged elite in the African American community.<sup>44</sup> Drachman further notes that these women were often buoyed along in their legal efforts by a man. Sadie Alexander's father, Aaron Albert Mossell, was the first African American to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania Law School in 1888.<sup>45</sup> Mossell was a champion of racial equality for African Americans even during law school, when he wrote a paper challenging the constitutionality of Pennsylvania's anti-

miscegenation laws. The questions Mossell posed would not be addressed by the Supreme Court for seventy-nine years: “What can be the freedom, of that government, whose liberty of thought, feeling and action, is hampered by arbitrary law? How can [blacks or whites] pursue [their] own good in [their] own way; subject only to the rights of others, not their opinions, tastes, or prejudices?”<sup>46</sup> Aaron Mossell became a member of the Philadelphia bar in 1893.<sup>47</sup>

While it would seem that Mossell’s life as a lawyer would have had a tremendous impact on Alexander’s education and decision to become an attorney, Mossell was never actually a fixture in Alexander’s life. In 1899, Mossell abandoned his wife, Sadie, and children and fled to Cardiff, Wales. “[D]espairing of success” in Philadelphia where he was one of very few lawyers of color and faced extreme racial prejudice, Mossell chose to settle in Cardiff where he continued to work on civil rights issues for people of color.<sup>48</sup>

#### **IV. THE EARLY LIFE OF SADIE TANNER MOSSELL**

##### **A. Childhood**

Sadie Tanner Mossell was born on January 2, 1898 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Aaron Albert Mossell, Jr. and Mary Louise Tanner Alexander. She had a sister, Elizabeth, who was six years older and a brother, Aaron, who was five years older.<sup>49</sup> When Sadie was only one year old, her father fled to Wales, deserting her family. As an adult, Sadie Alexander spoke openly about her father’s desertion and noted that if

anything, such an experience taught her that it was possible for women to successfully raise children on their own:

Now my father deserted my mother, and I tell you this because it is often thought that without a man in the house you can't do anything, but my mother did it all. And I often thought that perhaps it was God's will that he got out. So there wasn't any arguing. Everything was peace.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, Sadie's father's absence did have an effect on the family: "[M]y mother was a brilliant woman . . . but she never got over my father's leaving her."<sup>51</sup> Sadie was cared for by her mother and by her extended family. Sadie left Philadelphia with her mother and siblings and lived in Washington, D.C. with her mother's sister Sadie Moor and her husband Lewis Baxter Moore, Dean of Howard University. Though Sadie was never sure why they moved, she gathered it was due to her father's desertion: "I think [my mother moved us because] she was terribly embarrassed to be separated with [young children] and to have to change her standard of living, which was very high."<sup>52</sup> Sadie did not learn the true reason for her father's absence for many years: "I was in the eighth grade before I knew my father wasn't dead. The children told me he wasn't. And so he just didn't exist."<sup>53</sup>

Sadie attended elementary school in both Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., dividing time between her aunt and uncle's home on Howard University's campus and her grandparents' home in Philadelphia.<sup>54</sup> Sadie's mother, whom Sadie believed suffered from bouts of "emotional sickness," would bring Sadie with her back to the Tanner homestead in Philadelphia whenever she was sick; Sadie would attend the nearby Blaine School.<sup>55</sup> Sadie's life with her grandparents provided financial stability and educational opportunities

that would have otherwise been impossible. Said Sadie, “[W]e had a happy home. Very happy home. My grandparents were pretty well fixed, and they . . . were very good to us . . . I never would have had the education I have if it hadn’t been for my grandparents.”<sup>56</sup>

When Sadie reached her high school years, her mother left her permanently in the care of the Moores in Washington, D.C. Sadie attended M Street High School, graduating in 1915 and earning a scholarship to Howard University.<sup>57</sup> Sadie had looked forward to attending Howard during those years living on the campus with her aunt and uncle. “[L]iving on Howard’s campus, what do you think of but going to college?”<sup>58</sup> However, Sadie’s mother thought that her opportunities for graduate training would be better if she received her degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Upon hearing the news that she would not be attending Howard, Sadie remembers, “I screamed, I cried, I jumped up and down on the bed.”<sup>59</sup> But Sadie did eventually adhere to her mother’s directive and enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania.

## **B. Education**

### **1. The First Three Degrees**

“I recall praying every night beginning that fall: ‘God, give me the strength to do my assignment the very best I have the ability’ and ‘Dear Lord, teach me to walk alone and not be lonely, knowing Thou art at my side.’”<sup>60</sup>

#### **a. College**

Sadie Tanner Mossell entered the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 1915 and majored in education. As a black American woman, her years at Penn were extremely trying. While other pioneering women college students may have found refuge in each

other's company, white women students at Penn refused to acknowledge Sadie let alone offer support:

Not one woman in my class spoke to me in class or when I passed one or more than one woman on the walks to College Hall or the Library. Can you imagine looking for classrooms and asking persons the way, only to find the same unresponsive person you asked for directions seated in the classroom in which you entered late because you could not find your way? Let us imagine you came from Outer Space and entered the University of Pennsylvania School of Education. You spoke perfect English but no one spoke to you. Such circumstances made a student either dropout or a survivor so strong that she could not be overcome, regardless of the indignities?

While attending college, Sadie struggled with the racism she encountered from fellow students, male and female, and also faced fierce opposition from professors who refused to educate women students:

A woman friend and I signed up for a course at Penn that was being offered to the men only. When that professor came into class he saw us and chased us out. He told us he didn't care who said we could stay there-- he wasn't about to teach a woman. Yes, those were rough times.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, Sadie's strong familial support network helped her survive those trying years. Her mother and grandfather provided financial and emotional assistance to allow Sadie to flourish academically and navigate the minefields of institutional racism and sexism:

My mother packed a lunch for me. My first year there was only one other colored female student. We couldn't eat at any restaurant near the University . . . . When I came home, my mother had my dinner ready for me . . . . [E]verything was done at home to make it conducive to my studying.<sup>63</sup>

Sadie was able to focus on her coursework and, as a result, received high accolades for her achievements. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1918, with a

bachelor's of science in education. Sadie completed a four-year course of study in three years and received honors.<sup>64</sup> Upon graduation, the university awarded Sadie with a small broom for making a "clean sweep" of her coursework and receiving all "Distinguished" grades.<sup>65</sup> Alexander later noted that although she "made the grade to be admitted to Phi Beta Kappa," the University of Pennsylvania would not elect her.<sup>66</sup>

**b. Master's Degree and Doctorate**

Sadie continued with her studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and completed a one year master of arts degree program in economics. For her achievements in this arena, she was awarded the Frances Sergeant Pepper Fellowship in economics, one of five grants awarded to women in the graduate school of economics.<sup>67</sup> However, Sadie again faced discriminatory treatment from the administration at the University of Pennsylvania:

I had been accepted into Penn's Ph.D. program, but I was called down by the administration to answer for the "trouble" I had caused I the library. I didn't know what they were talking about, but I knew if this wasn't straightened out, I would be out of the program. It turned out the librarian had confused me with another black girl who had removed all the books from one particular section, and as the saying goes, "All Negroes look alike."<sup>68</sup>

Sadie was able to enter the Ph.D. program and completed her didactic work and dissertation within three years.<sup>69</sup> Her dissertation, titled "The Standard of Living Among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia, 1921," has been hailed as a "classic advocacy prescription" about the Great Migration of black people from the South to Northern cities.<sup>70</sup> Alexander became the first black woman in the United States to earn a Ph.D. in economics on June 15, 1921: "It was a great day, not only for me but all women,

so few of whom had qualified for this coveted degree in the year 1921."<sup>71</sup> Later in life, Sadie often recounted how she was “followed along the commencement procession route by photographers and reporters from across the country.”<sup>72</sup> Of her ceremonial march, she once said, “I was embarrassed and thrilled at the same time . . . Coming up the stairs to the platform I heard a voice say, ‘Here she comes.’ It was the president of Bryn Mawr. At that time Bryn Mawr didn’t admit black students.”<sup>73</sup>

### c. Post-Graduate Employment

Sadie left the University of Pennsylvania with more education than the vast majority of Pennsylvanians, white or black, male or female. However, she could find no school that would hire her: “I couldn’t get work anywhere. In fact, the situation was such in Philadelphia that I could not even have taught high school after I had gotten all this training because they didn’t employ any colored teachers.”<sup>74</sup> She found that her Ph.D. also did not enable her to obtain employment at any of the large white insurance companies. In spite of her professors’ excellent recommendations and their threats to stop referrals of any other students to the insurance companies if they refused to hire Sadie, every company refused to hire an African American woman.<sup>75</sup> After searching in vain for work in her native Pennsylvania, Sadie headed south to North Carolina. There, she “very gladly” accepted a position with the black-owned North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company in Durham as an assistant actuary.<sup>76</sup> Her years in Durham were also challenging, not only because of her gender and race but also because of her Northern roots. Since Sadie came

from the North and attended a Northern university, her years were “lonely and filled with occasions of prejudice from blacks.”<sup>77</sup>

## 2. Meeting Raymond Pace Alexander

It was during her years at the University of Pennsylvania that she first met Raymond Pace Alexander, the man with whom she would spend the majority of her lifetime. Raymond had been a student at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Finance and Commerce about the time Sadie completed her undergraduate coursework and entered her master’s program. At the time of their meeting, Sadie insists, she was not interested in marriage: “I wasn’t thinking about marrying Raymond or anybody else because I had things on my mind that I wanted to do.”<sup>78</sup> Raymond had earned a scholarship to Penn, and like Sadie, he completed his undergraduate coursework in three years.<sup>79</sup> Sadie was introduced to Raymond by his sister, Virginia, who was a classmate and close friend of Sadie’s.<sup>80</sup>

After Raymond graduated from Wharton in 1920 as its first black graduate, he entered Harvard Law School where he earned a degree in 1923. Sadie returned to Philadelphia that same year to marry Raymond. They were wed on November 29, 1923 at the Tanner homestead on Diamond Street in North Philadelphia.<sup>81</sup> Raymond was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar that same year and established a private practice.

### 3. Domesticity Drives Her to the Law

“I stayed home for one year and almost lost my mind--it was then that I decided I had better go to law school.”<sup>82</sup>

During their first year of marriage in Philadelphia, Sadie became involved in a number of volunteer activities befitting a young woman of her time. However, after her numerous academic achievements, keeping busy with “PTA and a lot of organizations” did not “particularly interest” Sadie and left her unsatisfied.<sup>83</sup> When her husband asked her what she was interested in trying to tackle next, Sadie surmised that her best professional opportunities might be achieved by going to law school. Her husband said that he could afford it and “he would be delighted. So to law school [she] went.”<sup>84</sup>

In 1924, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander became the first black woman ever to be enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania School of Law. Sadie tackled her legal education with the same steadfast determination and survival skills that helped her to reach academic success in her earlier pursuits. She faced the same barriers of institutional racism that marred her previous years at Penn:

When I was at law school I could go to the corner drugstore [for lunch]. But no restaurant would serve any of the colored students . . . . [I went to] the President of the University to state my concern, not only for myself but I took two other girls with me. It was bad for our health that we could never have a warm lunch in the cold winter time. And it was an indignity and I thought the university was too big not to take this matter into consideration. And he said that he realized what we were suffering but really he could do nothing about it.<sup>85</sup>

While Sadie worked tirelessly on her studies at the law school, she also faced racial and gender opposition from the law school administration. The Dean of the law school resented the presence of an African American woman in Penn's elite educational setting:

The dean of the law school during my years was Edward Mikell, a very prejudiced man. He directed that under no circumstances was I to be admitted to the club formed by a handful of women who attended the school at the time. It was after our admittance to the bar that the women told me of the dean's feelings. I was treated either with indifference or with disdain, so I would go home directly at twelve noon when classes were over and study alone until about six p.m. No one invited me to lunch--neither women nor men, so I just adapted myself to what was.<sup>86</sup>

In 1926, during her second year of law school, Sadie became one of the two first black student contributors and associate editors elected to the *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* by the student-run board of editors.<sup>87</sup> Again, Sadie locked horns with Dean Mikell. The Dean refused to break precedent by permitting a black woman member on the Board.<sup>88</sup> Luckily, Sadie found support from a fellow classmate who had strong connections with the faculty. Philip Werner Amram, the law review editor-in-chief whose father also happened to be a member of the law school faculty, threatened to resign unless Dean Mike11 reversed his decision.<sup>89</sup> The Dean relented, and Alexander joined the *Law Review* staff.<sup>90</sup> She graduated with honors from the University of Pennsylvania in 1927 as the school's first black woman graduate, and became the first black woman to gain admission to the Pennsylvania bar and enter the practice of law in the state of Pennsylvania.<sup>91</sup>

v. **HER LAWYER YEARS: CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND FEMINIST**

**A. One of the First Husband and Wife Legal Teams**

And as I often used to tell him, “Raymond, you have to get up very early in the morning to beat you. Wars can come and the men can leave, but you know your wife is going to be there. She’s a lawyer and she’ll watch the till and perform the duties that she can.” And it did work out very well. People often ask me, “How does it work?” And I say I don’t know how it could work better. Because we’ve had the same interests and the same purposes.<sup>92</sup>

After being admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar, Alexander entered practice at her husband’s law firm, making Sadie and Raymond Alexander one of the earliest husband and wife legal teams in the United States.<sup>93</sup> According to Sadie, “[m]y husband had a large, active practice and needed my services. It never occurred to him or me that I would not join his staff.”<sup>94</sup> One historian notes that Alexander derived “economic comfort, social status, and professional advantages” from her husband and that “marriage to a lawyer eased [her] way into the legal profession and moderated the dual handicaps of [her] sex and race.”<sup>95</sup> This may be true. It seems that Alexander’s husband successfully ran interference in the early stages of her legal career when she came face-to-face with sexist treatment from her husband’s black male colleagues:

One of [Raymond’s] most capable partners . . . objected to my ever being employed and plainly stated: ‘I cannot work with a woman.’ My husband who had no prejudices based upon sex in particular, nor otherwise, gave this partner the privilege of severing his relationship with the firm or accepting me as an employee, who would, if qualified, become a firm member. The partner remained.<sup>96</sup>

Ultimately, however, it was Alexander's own legal expertise that gained her the respect and accolades from her male colleagues: "As the month's passed [the formerly hostile partner] began asking me questions about variations in Pennsylvania law and requesting my opinion on a case. I knew I was not going to be the cause of breaking the partnership."<sup>97</sup> The Alexanders practiced law together for the majority of both of their careers. Sadie Alexander thought this partnership was a perfect match:

We came to work together; we went back home together, and all the way going and coming we were discussing . . . I'd say to him, 'What kind of day did you have?' And he'd tell me and I'd tell him about mine and . . . it was just a beautiful relationship we had. And we could sit at the table and just talk and talk.<sup>98</sup>

### 1. Alexander's Work Before the Orphans' Court

Almost immediately after gaining admission to the Pennsylvania bar, at her husband's suggestion Alexander arranged to be admitted to the Orphans' Court in Philadelphia.<sup>99</sup> She soon realized that her husband had suggested Orphans' Court because "none of the men liked this practice," as it "required book-keeping, not drama and histrionics" and "[t]here were no jury trials in cases before the Orphans' Court."<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, Alexander used this court as a learning experience and was able to gain a significant amount of legal expertise, due in part to the mentoring of one judge. Judge Thompson of the Orphans' Court told Alexander: "I want you to learn to [draft and file pleadings] so well that when a judge sees your name on a backer he will know your pleading is in proper form."<sup>101</sup> For approximately four months, the judge arranged personal weekly tutoring sessions with Alexander until he was satisfied that she had learned all he had set out to teach her.<sup>102</sup>

The Orphans' Court cases assigned to Alexander eventually offered her the opportunity to gain significant trial experience, unlike any experience most women lawyers in the city, regardless of race, could obtain. While most women lawyers in 1927 "prepared inventories, inheritance tax returns accounts, and petitions for distribution," Alexander argued appeals before the full Orphans' Court bench, the State Supreme Court, and the United States District Court.<sup>103</sup>

Alexander developed an expertise in probate law, divorce, and domestic relations matters, and became the firm's expert on estate and family law.<sup>104</sup> It may have been her father's desertion that created Alexander's special concern for orphaned and abandoned children. She was a strong proponent of strict child support and custody laws.<sup>105</sup> Among her colleagues, she was especially known for "the thoroughness of her presentations, her knowledge of the finer points of law, and the extraordinary quality and quantity of her work."<sup>106</sup> Inside Philadelphia's courtrooms, she had a reputation for "intense preparation, dignified presentation, and sharp analysis."<sup>107</sup>

### **3. Formation of a Black Legal Aid Bureau**

In the Alexanders' continuing efforts to offer assistance and legal expertise to the disenfranchised, they worked in a local black bar group with other black lawyers on community action projects. The John Mercer Langston Law Club,<sup>108</sup> a local club of black lawyers, formed in 1925 as an alternative to the Philadelphia Bar Association that had barred any meaningful participation by blacks.<sup>109</sup> The club provided a "professional and social base for the black legal cadre of Philadelphia" and formed the base for many

projects.<sup>110</sup> Sadie Alexander, the only black woman in the group, and another black lawyer named John Francis Williams, spearheaded a proposal and completed plans for the formation of a legal aid bureau to help blacks who were “unable to bear the cost of hiring lawyers.”<sup>111</sup> The bureau was initiated in 1932 after the Philadelphia Aid Welfare Bureau was abolished and received the 6th support of the black bar. Black lawyers freely volunteered their time and skills to blacks charged with crimes as well as those needing assistance in civil matters.<sup>112</sup>

### **3. Husband and Wife Break Down the Walls of Segregation**

“My husband and I were almost denied entrance to movie houses and hotels. Fortunately we were in a position to protest, to actively do something about it.”

In addition to her estate and family law practice, Alexander teamed up with her husband, who specialized in civil rights and criminal defense cases, to battle discrimination and segregation in Philadelphia hotels, restaurants, and movie theaters throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>113</sup> Alexander cites her early experiences with institutional racism and segregation in Philadelphia as the impetus for her civil rights work. During her studies at Penn, she arranged to attend a movie with Raymond, a female friend, and another young black man who was “fairer than Raymond” and who “if you just passed him by you wouldn’t know . . . was colored.”<sup>114</sup> The young man with the light complexion purchased four tickets prior to the performance:

When [the four of us] got to the theater they told us there was some mistake . . . . So we were quite persistent and each one of us started to speak what little foreign language we were able to handle . . . . And the manager didn’t know what we were speaking and he finally said, “They’re

not niggers. “ And then he offered us a box and we pretended that we didn’t want a box, It was intermission when they finally decided to seat us . . . Raymond and I said that we were determined to see that Philadelphia was better than that.<sup>115</sup>

She and Raymond attended public meetings throughout Philadelphia seeking to help blacks in the city who were denied admission to theaters. Though Raymond lost his first case to integrate a theater, he and his wife together continued to bring cases until they could successfully ban segregation from these public establishments.<sup>116</sup>

The Alexanders also helped to draft the 1935 Pennsylvania state public accommodations law, which prohibited discrimination in public places.<sup>117</sup> After its passage, they tested the law at one Philadelphia theater that refused admission to African Americans. Alexander and her husband, whose office was across the street from the theater, made several attempts to gain admission to the theater but were denied entrance: “[W]e had that man at that theater . . . arrested so often that one day he came over and he took his handkerchief and he waved it in the air and he said, ‘I surrender. They can take my job. But my wife can’t stand it.’<sup>118</sup> The Alexanders used the same technique to end segregation in several of the city’s hotels and restaurants.<sup>119</sup> In the following decade, Raymond and Sadie Alexander pushed for the hiring of African-Americans on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania and for the integration of the US. Armed Forces.<sup>120</sup>

#### **4. Alexanders’ Joint Political Organizing**

Perhaps as a natural outgrowth of their collective anti-discrimination lobbying and litigation, Sadie and Raymond Alexander were also an active force in politically mobilizing

Philadelphia's black community. As Alexander once stated, "he and I both were working at the level of the street."<sup>121</sup> They worked together to encourage black residents to vote on election nights and tried to provide a strong presence on the boards of community organizations:

[W]e worked from the ground up--every election night I would take the street list from my division and I would go to every house and ask the people to come out and vote. Raymond and I worked together just like twins. The only places we divided ourselves up were when it came to organizations, so that he would be on some boards and I would be on others. So that we would have a wider experience with people.<sup>122</sup>

## 5. Counseling the Church

While in practice with her husband, Sadie Alexander also provided legal expertise to members of the clergy. In 1944, Alexander became the first black woman lawyer elected by the bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church as attorney for their council.<sup>123</sup> Her maternal grandfather, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, had been a bishop with the A.M.E. church, and the church's council is "the highest governing group of the denomination."<sup>124</sup>

### B. First Black Woman Assistant City Solicitor

In addition to her work with her husband's law firm, Alexander also served in the municipal government. Only a few months after Alexander's admission to the Philadelphia Bar, she was appointed to be the first black woman Assistant City Solicitor in Philadelphia. At that time, women lawyers in Philadelphia generally worked as "research assistants, brief writers in law firms or banks or for the Attorney General's office."<sup>125</sup> There had been only one woman lawyer previously employed by the City Solicitor's

Office.<sup>126</sup> Alexander served as an assistant city solicitor from 1928 to 1930 and again from 1934 to 1938.<sup>127</sup>

**c. The Juggling Act: Assistant City Solicitor, Wife, Mother, and Feminist**

In her capacity as assistant city solicitor, Alexander worked to break down sexist attitudes about women in the workplace:

No sooner was I assigned and situated [at the solicitor's office] than I became pregnant. I felt the burdens of the world on my shoulders and feared having to give up my job with people saying "Isn't it just like a woman to go off and get pregnant." My husband felt I should resign the post as soon as my pregnancy was in evidence but I refused and stood firm, both for myself and for all other women.<sup>128</sup>

In 1930, Alexander wrote an article that explored the burdens placed on black working women. She stressed the importance of work as an avenue for the economic and political progress of black women. Alexander encouraged all women, regardless of the prestige of their jobs, to hang on to employment. Eventually, she argued, women will gain promotions in the workplace, if only because "employers did not want to lose their investment in longtime workers."<sup>129</sup> In addition, Alexander wrote that women should work for their own future well-being. In an industrialized society where men rated the work of a housewife as "valueless consumption," Alexander believed that women had to "place themselves again among the producers of the world," and be involved in endeavors "that resulted in the production of goods that have a price value."<sup>130</sup> In addition, Alexander felt that women in the work force provided for a happier marital environment: "The satisfaction which comes to the woman in realizing that she is a producer makes for

peace and happiness, the chief requisites in any home."<sup>131</sup> Again, Alexander stressed the positive aspects of women continuing employment while raising children: "The derogatory effects of the mother being out of the home are overbalanced by the increased family income, which makes possible the securing of at least the necessities of life, and perhaps a few luxuries."<sup>132</sup>

Even for a woman as educated and financially well-off as Alexander, there were still duties that a working woman had to perform from which husbands were exempt. In a 1977 interview, Sadie Alexander recalled some of the responsibilities that she had to juggle:

[A] woman who gets to work, and even who is as fortunate as I, that my husband was able to give me good help at home, I had the responsibilities in that house. I had to see that the silver is not stolen; that it's taken care of properly; that the linens are taken care of properly; that the food is in the house in the quality we want, and that the meals are what your husband likes.<sup>133</sup>

In addition to juggling her responsibilities to her profession and to her husband, Alexander gave birth to two girls while working as an assistant city solicitor. Alexander had a total of four premature babies, but only two survived.<sup>134</sup> Mary Elizabeth was born in 1934 and Rae Pace was born in 1936. Alexander admits that she was unable to "take care of them" and "give them the kind of care that they needed."<sup>135</sup> As the children grew, Alexander also had mounting responsibilities in her career. She tried cases at every opportunity in order to "gain experience" and "build a reputation."<sup>136</sup> However, she later recalls that her daughters must have resented her public life.<sup>137</sup> Alexander sent both her daughters to the Putney School, an exclusive private school, in order to ensure their

chances of gaining admission to reputable colleges. Alexander felt that she made the correct decision, as Mary went on to Barnard College, and Rae received a bachelor of arts degree from Boston University and a master's degree from Bank Street School of Education.<sup>138</sup>

#### **D. A Leader in the National Bar Association**

Alexander also helped to open the doors of the legal arena for other black women by playing an active role in the development of the National Bar Association (NBA). The NBA was formed in 1925 as a black national bar group in response to the American Bar Association's exclusion of blacks from membership.<sup>139</sup> Only one woman attended the first NBA meeting.<sup>140</sup> At the time, there were fewer than one thousand black lawyers in the country, and only one out of eighty-six blacks joined the association that first year.<sup>141</sup> However, Alexander and her husband played an active role in the development of the NBA.<sup>142</sup> At the NBA's annual meeting in 1928, the year after Alexander graduated from law school and gained admission to the Pennsylvania Bar, there were a reported 25 black women attorneys in the country.<sup>143</sup> In 1934, there were 1,230 black lawyers, which comprised 0.7 percent of all lawyers.<sup>144</sup> By 1945, nearly 25 percent of black lawyers in America were dues-paying members of the NBA.<sup>145</sup>

Raymond Alexander served as president of the NBA from 1929 to 1931, and expressed the organization's aims in an article published in the first volume of the NBA's publication entitled *National Bar Journal*:

To form a nationwide organization of practicing attorneys of the Negro race in an endeavor to strengthen and elevate the Negro lawyer in his profession and in his relationship to his people; to improve his standing at

the bar . . . and to stress those values that would serve to enhance the ethics of his practice and conduct, to condemn actions that would have a tendency to lessen respect for the lawyer and to create a bond of true fellowship among the colored members of the Bar.<sup>146</sup>

Raymond and Sadie Alexander worked to make the NBA a vehicle through which black lawyers could fight for an end to racial discrimination. At the sixth annual NBA meeting in 1930, Raymond Alexander made a call to arms to all lawyers present:

We lawyers are the conservators of the law. We owe to [black] people, who, more than any other people are in need of our services, a duty to see that there shall be a quick end to the discrimination and segregation they suffer in their everyday activity . . . And who, may I ask is more able to guard against further and more dangerous encroachments of the rights of the Negro than a body of well trained and well organized lawyers?<sup>147</sup>

Throughout the next two decades, the NBA's membership grew steadily, drew many black lawyers from across the nation, and organized many political efforts, including the support of federal, state, and local anti-discrimination legislation.<sup>148</sup>

### **1. Champion for Black Women Lawyers**

Negro women lawyers, along with all women practitioners of the law in the United States, have passed through the state of being a source of curiosity, amusement and doubt to one of well-founded respect. Indeed, their presence today is regarded as a normal, natural, daily occurrence. They have demonstrated their ability in public and private practice. They have been among the leaders in promoting protective labor and social legislation. They have contributed to the legal literature and the progress of law in America. They have sustained an excellent professional reputation. Indeed, there is nothing to distinguish them from their male colleagues. They have proven their ability, "to do as adversaries in the law, strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends."

With these words, Sadie Alexander used her position as one of the few women members of the NBA to help put the role of black women in the law in the forefront of NBA concerns. Prior to 1930, there had been little scholarly work on black women lawyers. At the NBA's fifteenth annual meeting in 1939, however, Alexander presented the role of black women lawyers as a major theme. She opened the meeting with an "informative discussion on women as practitioners of law."<sup>149</sup> In addition, she presented her own scholarly research on the history of black American women lawyers.<sup>150</sup> Her paper was subsequently published in the premier volume of the *National Bar Journal*. In her work, Alexander highlights the lack of attention to the status of black women lawyers in the United States and the importance of cataloguing such information:

In preparing this article, I was astonished to find little assembled material on the entry of American women into the learned profession of the law and shocked to ascertain that no one could tell me when or who was the first Negro woman admitted to practice before an American court. In view of the limited information on the subject of women as practitioners of law in the United States, and in view of their distinguished success as practitioners . . . it would appear that such information as I have been able to assemble on this subject was of such a knowable but unknown nature that it should be imparted to the readers of the *National Bar Journal*.<sup>151</sup>

Alexander provides information about Charlotte Ray, a black woman who was the first woman admitted to the District of Columbia Bar.<sup>152</sup> In addition, Alexander reports that there "are fifty-seven [black] women admitted to practice before the various courts of the United States" and provides an appendix with the names of all of these women.<sup>153</sup> She sent questionnaires to all the women whose addresses were known in order to obtain more information about each woman's educational background and type of practice. With respect to their educational attainment, Alexander comments that their education "equals

that of the Negro men lawyers and perhaps on the whole excels the latter."<sup>154</sup> About 75 percent of black women admitted to practice were actively engaged in the law, a figure Alexander called "an unusually large percentage."<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, at least 66 percent of those practicing were self-supporting, with annual incomes ranging from \$1500 to \$4000.<sup>156</sup> Alexander concludes, "[f]ew men are more successful, notwithstanding their advantages of accumulated experience, of opportunities for making contacts, not to mention their appearance at the Bar centuries before a woman lawyer was admitted."<sup>157</sup> Making a reference to Adam Smith's theory that only one "counsellor-at-law" out of every twenty attains success, Alexander quips, "what would be his amazement to find six out of every ten Negro women lawyers supporting themselves from the fruits of their profession"?"<sup>158</sup>

## 2. Election to National Office

Alexander was first elected national secretary of the NBA on November 26, 1943 at their eighteenth annual meeting in Baltimore, Maryland and remained in office until 1947.<sup>159</sup> At that time, relatively few women held membership in the organization.<sup>160</sup> During her term, she meticulously reported on the growth of the organization and the number of dues-paying members each year. In addition, she was responsible for the publication of three national directories of black American attorneys and was often consulted on the publication of future directories and other association business well after she left office.<sup>161</sup>

### E. Going Solo: Continuing the Fight for Women and Children

In 1959, after approximately three decades of working as a husband-wife team, Raymond Alexander became the first African American judge appointed to the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, the trial court of general jurisdiction.<sup>162</sup> At that time, Sadie Alexander opened her own law office. She continued to specialize in domestic relations, divorce, adoption, and juvenile care, though approximately 25 percent of her practice was devoted to civil and probate work.<sup>163</sup> For the most part, her clients were schoolteachers, government clerks, professional and business men and women or their spouses, and industrial workers.<sup>164</sup> Alexander often took cases from indigent clients:

If a domestic worker or laborer comes to me with a deserving case in the field in which I practice, which case cries out for competent counsel, I accept the case for a nominal fee. I consider this as much my duty as I consider it the duty of a physician to serve a dying patient.<sup>165</sup>

As the decades progressed and women began to gain more social, political, and economic rights through the much of the efforts of the early 1970s, Alexander began to witness a change in the way the courts viewed the responsibilities of women and men to financially support their children:

“It used to be that it was the responsibility of the father to support his children. The sole responsibility. But today, think what the judges immediately ask: How much does the woman make? They never let a man today carry home more money than the wife carries home . . . . Suppose she’d brought home \$500 a week, and he brings home \$750. They’re going to let him have a net of \$500 and she, the only amount she can hope to get is that \$250. They’re going to be equal. Every day they do it.<sup>166</sup>

Alexander continued to speak vociferously on behalf of women’s equality at the Bar, and freely shared her experiences in Philadelphia’s courtrooms in the 1960s and 1970s. In

1972, at the age of seventy-four, she wrote an article for a special “woman-focused” issue of the Philadelphia Bar Association journal, *The Shingle*. In her piece “Forty-Five Years a Woman Lawyer,” Alexander asserted that most men at the Bar failed to see women colleagues as equals:

[D]espite substantial progress since I first started in practice, we still have among the members of the Bar a limited number of males who cannot accept a woman as an opponent. As soon as they ascertain a woman practitioner represents their opponent, they begin laying roadblocks, such as absolutely unnecessary interrogations, preliminary objections, depositions, et cetera, et cetera, all of which information opposing counsel is willing to give, substantiated by photocopies of evidence.<sup>167</sup>

Alexander continued to take on these men in court in her solo practice until the age of seventy-six. She gave up her practice in 1974.

## **F. Later Political Endeavors**

### **1. Truman Commission**

As a champion for the civil rights and human rights of all people, Alexander was honored with an appointment in 1946 to President Harry S. Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights.<sup>168</sup> The appointment made Alexander a trailblazer in yet another way--she was the first black woman to ever be appointed to a presidential commission.<sup>169</sup> The committee was created to prepare a report to address the need for “more adequate and effective means and procedures for the protection of the civil rights of people of the United States.”<sup>170</sup> They issued the 1948 report *To Secure These Rights*, which cites the disconnect between American ideals and practice and provides recommendations for a program of action:

Civil rights . . . are statements of aspirations, of demands which we make on ourselves and our society. We believe that the principles which underlie them are timeless . . . . The protection of civil rights is a national problem which affects everyone. We need to guarantee the same rights to every person regardless of who he is, where he lives, or what his racial, religious, or national origins are.<sup>171</sup>

The report served as “a foundation for the civil rights movement and the basis for future civil rights policy decisions and legislation for decades to follow.”<sup>172</sup> Among other recommendations, the report called for the desegregation of the armed services. This occurred one year after the report was issued.<sup>173</sup>

## 2. The Philadelphia Commissions

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander played an extremely active role in Philadelphia civic and legal affairs even after her two terms as an assistant city solicitor. From 1949 to 1965, she served as a prominent member of the Philadelphia Fellowship Commission. In 1949, the General Assembly of Pennsylvania ordered the city of Philadelphia to draft a new city charter. The Fellowship Commission formed a special committee, chaired by Alexander, to ensure that the new charter would contain provisions that would safeguard equal opportunity and treatment in the city’s administration. As Chairperson, Alexander penned a portion of the city’s new charter, the Home Rule Charter of 1952, which called for the formation of the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission: “I had the privilege of presenting to the City Charter Commission the proposal for a commission . . . . [O]ur proposal was accepted by them without removing a comma.”<sup>174</sup> Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander was appointed to be one of the nine commissioners on the newly formed

Philadelphia Human Relations Commission.<sup>175</sup> The Commission investigated allegations of discrimination in employment in Philadelphia. In a 1963 speech, Alexander discussed the Commission, its responsibilities, and the sense of hopelessness that prevents many African Americans from ever using the Commission as avenue for redressing acts of discrimination:

We have a staff of twenty-nine persons, including eleven highly trained professionals, and a budget of close to \$300,000. We do not receive in one year thirty complaints in discrimination in employment. Filing a complaint is meaningless to a [black] man who has worn thin the soles of his shoes filing applications for work and then watched the less skilled white applicants being employed. Our Commission has to send inspectors into the industries and count the number of colored employees, skilled and unskilled, and examine employment applications in order to ferret out the discrimination. We must subpoena the records when the employer is uncooperative and hold expensive, prolonged public hearings to throw the light of public opinion on the employment problem.<sup>176</sup>

For a time, Alexander served as the Commission's Chairperson. According to one source, Alexander took over the Commission in "one of the most trying periods of American life when we were in a revolution."<sup>177</sup> They asserted that the "fact that there have been no sit-ins in Philadelphia is largely due to the work of the Commission."<sup>178</sup> In 1976, Alexander spoke proudly in an interview of the work that the Commission did during politically turbulent times: "[W]e were able to work . . . [v]ery successfully when you consider the atmosphere and what we were trying to do . . . to be able to bring in the heads of industry and question their conduct was progress."<sup>179</sup>

At the end of the administrations of Mayor Clark and Dilworth, however, Alexander felt increasing resistance to the Commission's efforts. When Mayor Tate was sworn into office, Alexander noticed a marked difference in the administration's treatment

of the commission: “[B]etween when we started to bring up cases of police brutality and the Commissioner determined that we would never interrogate a policeman, Mayor Tate pulled in the chains on us and the result was his determining that [he would force commissioners to resign].”<sup>180</sup> When Alexander refused to resign, the mayor stopped speaking to her and her husband.<sup>181</sup> In 1968, Alexander finally left her post.<sup>182</sup>

### 3. White House Conference on the Aging

Even as an octogenarian, Sadie Alexander continued to work actively on civil rights issues. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter appointed Alexander chairperson of the White House Conference on the Aging.<sup>183</sup> The conference was directed to address a wide range of social and economic needs of the nation’s elderly. Alexander gave speeches and held meetings in preparation for the conference. However, President Ronald Reagan removed her from the position in 1981 before the conference took place.<sup>184</sup>

## VI. HER LATER YEARS

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander lived an extremely full life. She maintained her own practice until the age of seventy-six. In 1974, her husband of over fifty years passed away. Alexander once cited her long and happy marriage to Raymond Pace Alexander as among her greatest accomplishments: “The most important achievement in my life . . . I think marrying a good man, and living with him for fifty-some years. Yes, that’s an achievement.”<sup>185</sup> In addition, Alexander also rated “having a good family” as one of her greatest achievements.<sup>186</sup> Her daughter Rae Alexander Minter now serves as the Director

of the Paul Robeson Cultural Center on Rutgers University's campus and has continued to keep the rich Tanner family history alive through her research on her great uncle painter Henry Ossawa Tanner. In 1996, she presented one of his paintings to President Clinton, making Henry Tanner the first black American artist to have work in the White House.<sup>187</sup>

In Alexander's later years, she received numerous honors and awards from colleges and universities. In 1970, she was finally elected to Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Pennsylvania. In addition, she received honorary degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore College, Drexel University, Lincoln University, and the Medical College of Pennsylvania. On April 15, 1980, the University of Pennsylvania presented Alexander with the Distinguished Service Award. In 1987, the Philadelphia Bar Association named a public service center in her honor.<sup>188</sup>

After Sadie Alexander gave up her own practice, she continued to be involved in the practice of law. She joined the Philadelphia firm of Atkinson, Myers, and Archie as Counsel.<sup>188</sup> Alexander remained active in Philadelphia's legal and civic community for several more years. Hesitantly, she retired from public life in 1983 after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.<sup>190</sup> Alexander lived in the Roxbury section of Philadelphia in the Cathedral Village retirement community until her death from complications of Alzheimer's disease, pneumonia, and Parkinson's disease in November, 1989. She was ninety-one years old.<sup>191</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

“I haven’t worked for the money. There’s only so much you can eat, and you can only sleep in one bed--but I always wanted to do something where you can contribute something.”<sup>192</sup>

I have ended this initial biographical sketch with a desire to learn even more about the numerous contributions that Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander made during her ninety-one years. From what I have learned, she lived a truly extraordinary life for any woman of any time, and especially for a black American woman born at the turn of the century. Alexander possessed an unflinching determination to succeed in the overtly racist and sexist University of Pennsylvania community and was a headstrong legal activist for abandoned and orphaned children, for women, for people of color, and for those who were economically disenfranchised. Because she lived such a tremendously full and active life, I know that there are other aspects of her life I have not begun to properly explore.

The story of this first black woman lawyer of Pennsylvania is worthy of more research and time. There are other avenues that could benefit from exploration. For example, Alexander was extremely active in a multitude of legal and civic organizations locally and nationally. To name a few, Alexander was active with the National Committee of the American Civil Liberties Union for decades, helped to form President John F. Kennedy’s 1963 Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, served as Secretary for the National Urban League for many years, and was the First National President of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.<sup>193</sup> There may be more interesting tales of her involvement with these civic and legal organizations or perhaps more of her papers stored at these

organizations' national headquarters. In addition, I would have liked to have taken time to follow up on other research leads.

One of the richest research sources of information on Sadie Alexander is the University of Pennsylvania Library Archives. Sadie Alexander, her husband, and her sister-in-law have their papers housed in the library's archives. Unfortunately, the library materials do not circulate, and I was unable to travel to Philadelphia while conducting research for this initial biographic sketch. I am confident that the papers housed in the University of Pennsylvania library would provide enough rich information for a truly in-depth study of Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander.

In addition, I would have liked to learn even more about how Alexander juggled the competing responsibilities of a career, homemaking, and motherhood. There are live resources that would be very helpful in exploring this topic. Alexander's two children, Mary Elizabeth Brown and Rae Pace Minter, would likely provide colorful stories of their life with their mother,

I have learned that a biographer's search is never-ending, and there are always stones left unturned. But I feel grateful to have at least unearthed this introductory picture of Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander. Her extraordinary life and legacy provide a lesson for all persons struggling to overcome obstacles and contribute a part of themselves to the struggle for justice and equality.

ENDNOTES

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1. RUTH EDMONDS HILL, 2 THE BLACK WOMEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 80( 1991) (1977 interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander).

2. DARLENE CLARK HINE, ED., 1 BLACK WOMEN IN AMERICA: AN HISTORICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA 17 (1993) (quoting Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander's advice to young black men and women in an 1981 interview).

3. J. CLAY SMITH, JR., EMANCIPATION: THE MAKING OF THE BLACK LAWYER 1844-1944 2 (1993).

4. *Id.*

5. Walter J. Leonard, *The Development of the Black Bar*, 407 ANNALS OF AM. ACADEMY 136 (1973).

6. *Id.*; GERALDINE R. SEGAL, BLACKS IN THE LAW: PHILADELPHIA AND THE NATION 2 (1983).

7. *Id.*

8. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 4.

9. *Id.* ("Black people often used black lawyers in almost hopeless criminal matters but turned to white lawyers in the more lucrative civil cases.").

10. *Id.* at 4-5 (quoting R.R. WRIGHT, THE NEGRO IN PENNSYLVANIA 80 (reprint, 1969)).

11. *Id.* at 22 n. 30.

12. Leonard, *supra* note 5 at 140.

13. *Id.*

14. KAREN BERGER MORELLO, THE INVISIBLE BAR: THE WOMAN LAWYER IN AMERICA, 1638 TO THE PRESENT 147-48 (1986) (quoting Robert Washington Odum's Columbia University doctoral dissertation on "the Social and Mental Traits of the Negro").

15. *Id.* at 144 (quoting historian Eleanor Flexner) (quotations omitted).

16. Leonard, *supra* note 5 at 137.

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19. Virginia G. Drachman, *the New Woman Lawyer and the Challenge of Sexual Equality in Early Twentieth-century America* 28 IND. L. REV. 227 (1995).

18. MARIANNA W. DAVIS, ED., 1 CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLACK WOMEN TO AMERICA 436 (1981).

19. Drachman, *supra* note 17 at 227.

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. DAVIS, *supra* note 18 at 436.

23. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 613.

24. See *generally* PAULA GIDDINGS, WHEN AND WHERE I ENTER: THE IMPACT OF BLACK WOMEN ON RACE AND SEX IN AMERICA (1984).

25. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 588.

26. *Id.* at 152

27. *Id.* at 612.

28. *Id.* at 154.

29. *Id.* at 631-32.

30. SEGAL, *supra* note 6 at 29.

31. *Id.* at 29-30.

32. John H. Hewitt, *White House Unveils First African American Painting*, N. Y. AMSTERDAM NEWS 25 (NOV. 9, 1996).

33. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 17.

34. *Id.*; HILL, *supra* note 1 at 74.

35. JESSIE CARNEY SMITH, ED., NOTABLE BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN 5 (1992).

36. *Id.*

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37. *Id.*

38. *Id.*

39. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 74.

40. *Id.*

41. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 5.

42. GERTRUDE E.H. BUSTILL MOSSELL, *THE WORK OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN WOMAN* (1894).

43. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 73.

44. Drachman, *supra* note 17 at 233-34.

45. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 165.

46. *Id.* at 154 (quotations omitted).

47. SEGAL, *supra* note 6 at 28.

48. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 5.

50. Her sister Elizabeth Mossell Anderson later received a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree from Columbia University. She served as Dean of Women at Virginia State college and later at Wilburforce University in Ohio. Her brother Aaron Mossell attended Howard University and became a pharmacist. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 5-6.

50. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 75.

51. MORELLO, *supra* note 14 at 150.

52. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 76.

53. *Id.*

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.*

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56. *Id.* at 74.

57. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 17.

58. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 77.

59. *Id.*

60. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 6.

61. *Id.* (quotations omitted).

62. MORELLO, *supra* note 14 at 148-49.

63. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 78.

64. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 18.

65. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 6.

66. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20 1976). Alexander Papers. (Alexander noted that in the year 1972 or 1973, she received a letter from Penn, stating that the university had reviewed her record and hoped that she would accept her Phi Beta Kappa key, which she did). *Id.*

67. *Id.*

68. MORELLO, *supra* note 14 at 149.

69. *Id.*

70. Julianne Malveaux, *Speaking of Education: Making Room for Sadie and W. E. B.*, BLACK ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUC. 45 (Feb. 23, 1995).

71. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 84.

72. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 6 (citing Alexander Papers).

73. Myma Oliver, *Sadie Alexander Pioneered Opportunities for Blacks*, L. A. TIMES 26 (Nov. 7, 1989).

74. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander Papers.

75. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 18.

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76. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers.
77. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 6.
78. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers.
79. *Id.*
80. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 78.
81. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 6.
82. MORELLO, *supra* note 14 at 149.
83. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers.
84. *Id.*
85. *Id.*
86. MORELLO, *supra* note 14 at 149 (quotations omitted).
87. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 39. The other black student was Robert Burke Johnson. *Id.*
88. *Id.*
89. *Id.*
90. *Id.* at 158.
91. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 18.
92. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers.
93. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 18.
94. Sadie T.M. Alexander, *Forty-Five Years as a Woman Lawyer*, 35 THE SHINGLE 126 (Jun. 1972).
95. Drachman, *supra* note 17 at 234.
96. Alexander, *supra* note 94 at 126.

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97. *Id.*

98. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 80.

99. Alexander, *supra* note 94 at 126.

100. *Id.*

101. *Id.* at 127.

102. *Id.*

103. *Id.*

104. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 18.

105. MORELLO, *supra* note 14 at 150.

106. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.

107. *Sadie T. M. Alexander, 91, Civil Rights Leader*, HARRISBURG PATRIOT & EVENING NEWS B2 (Nov. 3, 1989).

108. Named after John Mercer Langston, a 19th century black lawyer from Richmond, Virginia admitted to the bar of the United States Supreme Court under President Garfield, and founder of Howard University Law School. SEGAL, *supra* note at 186.

109. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 583.

110. *Id.*

111. *Id.*

112. *Id.*

113. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.

114. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers.

115. *Id.*

116. *Id.*

117. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 18.

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118. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers
  119. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 19.
  120. *Id.*
  121. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers.
  122. *Id.*
  123. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 188 n. 329.
  124. *Id.*
  125. Alexander *supra* note 94 at 127.
  126. *Id.*
  127. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 18.
  128. MORELLO, *supra* note 14 at 151.
  129. GIDDINGS, *supra* note 24 at 196 (quoting Sadie T.M. Alexander, *Negro Women in Our Economic Life*, OPPORTUNITY 202 (July 1930)).
  130. *Id.* at 196-97 (quotations omitted).
  131. *Id.* at 197 (quotations omitted).
  132. *Id.* (quotations omitted).
  133. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 8 l-82.
  134. *Id.* at 79.
  135. *Id.*
  136. *Id.*
  137. *Id.*
  138. *Id.*

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139. *See* SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 552-560. The ABA explicitly opened its membership to blacks in 1943, but did not welcome black members until the late 1950s and 1960s. SEGAL, *supra* note 6 at 19.
140. *Id.* at 556.
141. SEGAL, *supra* note 6 at 19.
142. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 18.
143. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 558.
144. SEGAL, *supra* note 6 at 19.
145. *Id.*
146. *Id.* at 18 (quoting Raymond Pace Alexander, *The National Bar Association--Its Aims and Purposes*,) 1 NATIONAL BAR J. 2-3 (Jul. 1941)).
147. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 561.
148. *See generally* Sadie T.M. Alexander, *Report of the Secretary*, 4-6 NATL. BAR J. (1944-46).
149. *Id.* at 567 (quotations omitted).
150. *Id.* at 188.
151. Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, *Women as Practitioners of Law in the United States*, 1 NATIONAL BAR J. 56, 58 (Jul. 1941).
152. *Id.* at 59.
153. *Id.* at 63-64.
154. *Id.* at 61.
155. *Id.*
156. *Id.* at 62.
157. *Id.*
158. *Id.* at 62-63.

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159. SMITH, *supra* note 3 at 188.
160. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.
161. *Id.*
162. SEGAI, *supra* note 6 at 30.
163. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.
164. *Id.*
165. *Id.* (citing personal data questionnaire of the Judicial Nominating Commission, Alexander Papers).
166. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 81.
167. Alexander, *supra* note 94 at 127.
168. Also referred to as Truman's Commission to Study the Civil Rights of All Races and Faiths, Committee on Human Rights, and Truman's Committee on Human Relations.
169. SEGAL, *supra* note 6 at 31.
170. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.
171. U.S. PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS, TO SECURE THESE RIGHTS: THE REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS x-xi (1947).
172. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.
173. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 19.
174. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers.
175. *Id.*
176. RONALD K. BURKE, AMERICAN PUBLIC DISCOURSE: A MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE 92 (1992) (quoting Sadie T.M. Alexander's 1963 Founder's Day Address to Spellman College students).
177. DAVIS, *supra* note 18 at 436.

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178. *Id.*

179. Interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander (Oct. 20, 1976). Alexander papers.

180. *Id.*

181. *Id.*

182. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.

183. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 19.

184. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.

185. HILL, *supra* note 1 at 82.

186. *Id.*

187. Marques Harper, *New white House Painting Has Rutgers Ties*, THE DAILY TARGUM (Fall 1996).

188. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 19.

189. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 7.

190. *Id.* at 8.

191. *Id.* at 8; *Sadie T.M. Alexander*, *supra* note 107 at B2.

192. HINE, *supra* note 2 at 19 (quoting a 1981 interview with Sadie T.M. Alexander).

193. Others include: the Americans for Democratic Action, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Philadelphia Housing Authority, The Benezet Committee, National Welfare Assembly, United States Committee of the International Conference on Social Work, Committee on Religion and Public Education, National Conference on Christians and Jews, National Defense Conference on Negro Affairs, National Mid-century Committee for Children and Youth, Philadelphia Bar Associations' subcommittee on human rights, Philadelphia Council for Community Advancement, Philadelphia Household Institute, Philadelphia USO Council, Philadelphia Service Organization, National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capitol, Texas Centennial Commission, Wharton Settlement, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. CARNEY SMITH, *supra* note 35 at 8; HINE, *supra* note 2 at 19.

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## Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander ( 1 8 9 8 - 1 9 8 9 )

1st Black Woman Ph.D. in United States  
1st Black Woman Admitted to Pennsylvania Bar  
1st Black Woman Graduate of University of Pennsylvania Law School

### Family History / Black Deeds / Black Archives

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- Maternal Grandfather: Benjamin Tanner Tucker (1835-1923) was a Bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1st ordained in 1860) and founder of the *A.M.E. Church Review*. He also published several books.
- Paternal Grandparents: Both were “free Negroes” who refused to have any children born into slave territory. They sold their house and brickyard in Baltimore and moved to Hamilton, Ontario to have three sons and one daughter. AU three sons graduated from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.
- Maternal Uncle: Henry O. Tanner (1859-1937) was a famous painter and activist.
- Maternal Aunt: Dr. Hallie Tanner Johnson was a graduate of the Women’s Medical College and the first woman (of any race) admitted to practice medicine in Alabama. She established the Nurses’ School and Hospital at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.
- Paternal Uncle: Dr. Nathan Francis Mossell (1856-1946) was a graduate of University of Pennsylvania Medical School and surgeon who co-founded Philadelphia’s Frederick Douglass Hospital in 1895 which later merged with Mercy Hospital to form Mercy-Douglass.
- Paternal Aunt (tie of N.F. Mossell): Gertrude E.H. Bustill Mossell (1855-1948) wrote the black feminist manifesto *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*, a collection of original essays and poems, in 1894. She was also a contributing writer to many major publications.
- Uncle: Lewis Baxter Moore was a dean at Howard University and the first (black?) Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.
- Tanner Family: Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander is in the fifth generation of the Tanner family recorded in the United States census as “free Negroes.”
- Father: Aaron Albert Mossell, Jr. was a lawyer and the first black graduate of the

University of Pennsylvania Law School (1888).

Mother: Mary Tanner Mossell, daughter of Bishop and Sarah Elizabeth Tanner.

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### Childhood in Philadelphia and Washington, DC

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- January 2, 1898 Born Sadie Tanner Mossell in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her sister Elizabeth was six years older and her brother Aaron was five years older.<sup>1</sup>
- 1899
- \* Father deserted family: *“Now my father deserted my mother, and I tell you this because it is often thought that without a man in the house you can’t do anything, but my mother did it all.”*
  - \* Sadie moved to Washington, DC with her mother and siblings: *“I think [my mother moved us because] she was terribly embarrassed to be separated with [young children] and to have to change her standard of living, which used to be very high.”*
- circa 1905-1913 Attended grade school in Philadelphia and Washington, DC When her mother suffered from bouts of “emotional sickness,” Sadie would return to Philadelphia with her mother and attend Blaine School.
- circa 1913 - 1915 Sadie’s mother returned permanently to Philadelphia and left Sadie in her uncle Lewis Baxter Moore and aunt Sadie Moore’s care in Washington. Sadie attended M Street High School, now called Dunbar High School and graduated in 1915.

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### Education

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- 1915-1918 Attended the School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania and received a bachelor of science degree in 1918 (completing a four year course in three years).
- 1918 Entered the Graduate School at Penn to study economics and received her master’s in 1919.
- 1921 Became the first black woman to obtain a Ph.D.
- 1921-1923 Had difficulty finding employment in Philadelphia and went to work for the black-owned North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company in Durham.

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<sup>1</sup> Her sister Elizabeth Mossell Anderson received a bachelor’s degree from Penn and a master’s degree from Columbia University She served as Dean of Women at Virginia State College and later at Wilburforce University in Ohio. Her brother Aaron Mossell attended Howard University and became a pharmacist.

- Fall 1924 Entered the University of Pennsylvania Law School.
- Fall 1926 Became one of the two first black student contributors and associate editors of the *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*.<sup>2</sup>
- 1927 Became the first black woman to graduate from Penn Law School and the first black woman to be admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar. (Graduated with honors).
- 1974 Received honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Penn
- 1977 Received honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Lincoln University.
- 1979 Received honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Swarthmore College.

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### Union with Raymond Pace Alexander

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- R.P. Alexander
- \* Born in Philadelphia in 1897 (died 1974).
  - \* Supported himself from the age of twelve after his mother died.
  - \* Entered the University of Pennsylvania in 1917, graduated from the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce in 1920 (first black person to do so).
  - \* Graduated from Harvard Law School in 1923.
  - \* Admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1923 and entered into practice.
  - \* Served as an advocate in many important race discrimination and segregation in public accommodations cases and was a defense attorney in numerous criminal cases.
  - \* Appointed to City Council in 1951.
- 1917 Met her husband at Penn, where he was also enrolled as an undergraduate.
- 1923 Sadie left North Carolina and returned to Philadelphia to marry Raymond. “[M]y husband. . . respected me to no end. Otherwise I would never have been a lawyer. He sent me to law school one year after we were married.”
- 1927-1959 Joined her husband’s practice, specializing in estate and family law. “One of the lawyers in his office was going to leave when I came in, and he told him to leave. He had great respect for women.”

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<sup>2</sup> Dean Edward Mikell initially refused to break precedent by allowing a black woman membership on the Board. However, law review editor Philip Werner Ann-am threatened to resign unless the dean reversed his decision. The dean backed down and Alexander remained in her elected position.

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**Government Work**

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|-------------------------|--|
| 1928-1930,<br>1934-1938 | Appointed Assistant City Solicitor for the City of Philadelphia. She was the second woman in law to hold the position of assistant city solicitor and the first black woman to work in the solicitor's office in Philadelphia. |
| 1946                    | Named by President Truman to his Committee on Human Rights.  |
| 1952-1968               | Helped found the Commission on Human Relations of the City of Philadelphia (CHR) through her work with the Philadelphia Fellowship Commission. Served as Chairperson of the CHR for five years.                                |
| 1978                    | Appointed by President Carter to be the chairperson of the White House Conference on Aging (at 82!). She was removed from her position by President Reagan before the conference took place.                                   |

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**Other Legal Work**

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|-------------------|---|
| 1932              | Under her leadership, the John Mercer Langston Law Club (professional and social organization for black lawyers in Philadelphia), proposed and completed plans for the formation of a legal aid bureau to assist blacks who could not afford lawyers. Alexander was the only black woman lawyer in this group. Several members of the group volunteered and assisted indigent blacks in civil and criminal matters. |
| August 26, 1939   | Presented a comprehensive paper on black women lawyers at the 15th Annual Meeting of the National Bar Association in New York City, the black parallel organization to the American Bar Association (The ABA excluded blacks until 1952). <sup>3</sup>  |
| November 26, 1943 | Elected national secretary of the National Bar Association. Reelected to this position for many consecutive years.  |
| 1944              | First black woman elected by the bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church as attorney for their council, "the highest governing group of the denomination."  |
| 1946 - ?          | Involved with the Philadelphia Bar Association. Served on many  |

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<sup>3</sup> Prior to 1930, there was almost no scholarly work on black women lawyers. At the time of the meeting, Alexander was one of only fifty-seven women lawyers in the country.

committees, including the Committee on International and Foreign Law.

- 1959 Husband was named to the Court of Common in Philadelphia and gave up his practice. Alexander practiced independently until 1976.
- 1970 - ? Assumed leadership role in the Philadelphia Bar Foundation.
- 1976 Joined the firm of Atkinson, Myers, and Archie in the capacity of counsel.
- 1982 Retired from practice and public life.

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### Civic Organizations

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- 1921 - 1981 Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Served an extended term as Delta's first national president *"I got the most out of . . . the sorority as an undergraduate . . . . I learned how to organize a public meeting, how to-get the crowd there, how to speak. I met girls from all over the country, and I began to broaden my friendships, knowledge of people and the way they lived."*
- 1930 - 1957 Active with the National Urban League and served as Secretary for twenty-five years.
- 1946 - 1965 Active with the Philadelphia Fellowship Commission and served as Secretary.
- 1948 - 1982 Active with the National Committee of the American Civil Liberties Union.
- 1948 - 1959 Active with Americans for Democratic Action. Served on the National Board and as National Vice President.
- 1952 Traveled to India with the United States Committee of the International Conference of Social Work.

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### More on Personal Life

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- Children
  - \* Alexander had four premature babies. The first two died and the second two survived. She named them Mary Elizabeth (Brown) and Rae Pace (Minter).
  - \* *"They were born in the depths of the depression and you could get a trained nurse very reasonably. . . . I was not able to . . . give them the kind of care that they needed."*
  - \* Both daughters attended the Putney School (boarding school). Mary

graduated from Barnard and Rae graduated from Boston University, received a master's degree from Bank Street, and worked on her doctorate at Penn.

- Travel
- \* Traveled with husband to Russia in the 1930s.
  - \* Visited her uncle Henry Tanner (painter) frequently in Paris.
- Hobbies
- \* Horsebackriding.

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### More Interesting Quotes

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- On White and Black Women's Equality      *“It's my opinion that white women are doing all this talk about equality. . . because first they don't know anything about prejudice until they have received their degrees and passed their state boards. . . and then the doors begin to slam in their faces. Instead of opening the door, as they have been, treated like ladies, the doors slam back and forth. Now you see, I never looked for anybody to hold the door open for me. I knew well that the only way I could get that door open was to knock it down; because I knocked all of them down.”*
- On the Role of Black Women vs. Black Men      *I think it's much harder being a woman, because the first thing is, the men are athletic . . . they're crazy about athletes. But a woman . . . first, other women are very jealous, you got them to fight. I don't think men have to fight jealous as much as we do.*
- On Marriage      *The most important achievement in my life . . . I think marrying a good man and living with him for fifty-some years. Yes, that's an achievement.*