

## Legacy of Dr. Sadie T. M. Alexander

In the late 19th century, colleges began to open their doors to allow women to participate in higher education. While this opportunity looked like it was open to all, it largely excluded women of color. Black women, especially, attended HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) or colleges like Oberlin, which accepted both female and Black students. Dr. Sadie T.M. Alexander, like many Black students, was slated to go to Howard University, where her uncle was the dean. But she was instructed by her mother to attend the University of Pennsylvania to follow in her family's footsteps. Her father, Aaron Albert Mossell, and uncle, Nathan Francis Mossell, were the first African Americans to gain law and medical degrees respectively at the University of Pennsylvania. Additionally, her grandfather, Louis Baxter Moore, whom she spent her childhood with, was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from the university.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Alexander continued with her education and became the first African American woman to get a Ph.D. in economics. Due to racist and sexist employment policies, she was unable to find a job that utilized her educational background. She decided to follow her husband's footsteps and become a lawyer. She became the first Black woman to receive a degree at University of Pennsylvania's School of Law and to pass the bar exam in Pennsylvania in 1927. After law school, she and her husband managed a private firm in which they helped desegregate public spaces in Pennsylvania.

Educated at the M Street High School, Dr. Alexander escaped the segregated schools for Black students that were poorly staffed and under-resourced. It was one of the first few schools constructed for the purpose of educating Black students and preparing them to excel in the nation's top institutions. The educational disadvantage that many African Americans faced led Dr. Alexander to be a huge proponent for policies that not only ensured training for African American communities but also laws that would protect them from unemployment. Her study of economics and her experience further solidified her claim that consistent employment was the solution to Black prosperity. She spoke out against economic policies like the National Recovery Act and the Social Security Act and their negative impact on the African American community, and called for efficient anti-racist policies to protect Black workers. She saw employment and economic improvement as the bridge to improve white and Black labor relations.

*By Amanda Sowah '22, Clarke Forum Student Project Manager*

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Information gathered from: "Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander Papers," Penn University Archives and Records Center (upenn.edu); Davlyn Hollie's "Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander" in West Philadelphia Collaborative History (upenn.edu); "Economists are Rediscovering a Lost Heroine" in *The Economist*, Dec 16, 2020; Sadie T.M. Alexander's "Democracy, Race, and Justice: The Speeches and Writings of Sadie T. M. Alexander," edited by Nina Banks (Yale University Press 2021). Gerald D. Jaynes's "Alexander, Sadie Tanner Mossell (1898-1989)" in *Encyclopedia of African American Society* (Encyclopedia of African American Society, 2005), "M Street High School (Perry School)," D.C. Historic Sites (<https://historicsites.dcpreservation.org>), "Washington DC's Segregated School System, 1900-1954," Prologue DC, LL (<https://prologuedc.com/>).