

Legislation Text

File #: 180669, **Version:** 0

Honoring and recognizing Dr. Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, Esq., and calling for the creation and erection of a statue to commemorate her accomplishments and contributions to Philadelphia and beyond.

WHEREAS, Sadie Tanner Mossell, a woman of many firsts, is the epitome of a trailblazer. She was born on January 2, 1898 in Philadelphia to Mary Louisa Tanner and Aaron Albert Mossell II, who himself was the first African American graduate from the University of Pennsylvania Law School in 1888; and

WHEREAS, Mossell followed in her father's footsteps and graduated early with honors from the University of Pennsylvania with a bachelor's degree in education; and

WHEREAS, During her time at the University of Pennsylvania, she faced countless incidents of discrimination and alienation at the hands of her classmates - including white women - as well as the University leadership and staff. The dean of the Law School even refused to speak with her, and other female students were prohibited from studying with her; and

WHEREAS, Despite these hurdles as a student, Mossell persevered, continued to pursue her academic goals, and enrolled in the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where in 1921, she became the first black person to receive a Ph.D. in economics, and one of three black women in the country to first earn a doctorate degree. Her thesis, "The Standard of Living among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia," explored the household budgets of black migrants; and

WHEREAS, During the course of her studies, from 1919 to 1923, Mossell also served as the first National President of the illustrious Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, where she worked to expand the organization's membership and advance their five-point program thrust of economic development, educational development, physical and mental awareness, international involvement, and political and social involvement. Mossell's commitment to the expansion of her Sorority is exemplified in her service as a founding member of the Philadelphia Alumnae Chapter and the countless social and political causes she spearheaded as a woman of Delta; and

WHEREAS, Despite her academic success, Mossell faced discrimination in the workforce. Unable to obtain a professional economics position in Philadelphia, she moved to Durham to work for North Carolina Mutual Life, the largest black insurance company in the U.S. Her philosophy was that economic equality for all working-class people would help achieve civil equality for black people. She became a champion of the working class and believed full employment was a civil right; and

WHEREAS, In 1923, she married Raymond Pace Alexander, who was a Harvard Law School graduate. At this time, she took his last name while keeping her own, becoming Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, or Sadie T.M. Alexander. After establishing their home and career, the couple had two children, Mary Elizabeth and Rae, respectively. Alexander staunchly believed that a woman could have it all - a vibrant career, as well as a healthy marriage and thriving family - and she made it her mission to do so, successfully. She also encouraged and supported other women in their pursuit of lucrative careers while they had children; and

WHEREAS, Following her marriage, Alexander enrolled to study law at the University of Pennsylvania. During her studies, she helped expand the National Bar Association, the professional organization for black lawyers, many of whom were changing the scope of the American legal system by fighting regressive and discriminatory state and federal policies. She was also a contributor and assistant editor for *The University of Pennsylvania Law Review*. When she graduated in 1927, she was the first black woman to graduate from Penn Law School, and the first black woman to pass the Pennsylvania Bar; and

WHEREAS, Upon graduation from law school, Alexander joined her husband's prestigious law firm, becoming the first black woman to practice law in Pennsylvania. She quickly established herself as a premier attorney in probate and domestic law, becoming one of the most revered legal minds in the Commonwealth. She remained with the firm for over 30 years, and founded her own law practice after its closing; and

WHEREAS, The Alexander Firm became Philadelphia's leading civil rights law firm, as she and her team fought desegregation cases, appealed racially biased criminal prosecutions, mobilized community support for integration, and lobbied legislators and public officials to implement policies that protected African Americans and created an equitable pathway for their pursuit of life, liberty, safety, and happiness; and

WHEREAS, In 1928, she became the Assistant City Solicitor of the City of Philadelphia. This made Alexander the first black woman to serve in this role, which she did for eight years; and

WHEREAS, As the leader of the John Mercer Langston Law Club, a professional organization for black lawyers, Alexander knew first hand the plight of her community and the lack of access to affordable and effective legal assistance for people of color; thus, she created a legal aid bureau to assist low income African Americans with navigating the legal system; and

WHEREAS, For 25 years, Alexander served on the board of the National Urban League, which worked to help African Americans achieve civil rights. She was also a member of the national committee of the American Civil Liberties Union for over 30 years. She was a member of the Philadelphia Bar Association, and secretary of the National Bar Association; and

WHEREAS, In 1934, Alexander, along with her husband, drafted the Pennsylvania State Public Accommodations Law, which prohibited discrimination in public places; and

WHEREAS, Alexander's accomplishments earned her national attention from President Harry S. Truman, who appointed her to his Committee on Civil Rights in 1947. The committee's report *To Secure These Rights*, was one of the most important documents on race relations and civil rights post-World War II and became the basis for later policy and legislation. She was the first black woman to be on a president's committee; and

WHEREAS, Alexander continued her mission to change the landscape not only in Philadelphia, but also nationally. She joined the civil rights and voter rights movements of the South, organizing and walking with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the historic 1965 Selma to Montgomery March, which contributed to the passing of the Voter Rights Act; and

WHEREAS, Alexander's career also includes her service as a founding member and Chairperson for the Commission of Human Relations for the City of Philadelphia, where she fought against housing discrimination and police brutality, and an appointment by President Jimmy Carter to serve as Chairperson of his White House

Conference on Aging to advocate for senior protections, and;

WHEREAS, Throughout her career, Alexander publicly addressed audiences of sororities, political parties, religious groups, civil rights organizations, and the general public across the country. She maintained her focus on challenging institutional racism and economic inequality; and

WHEREAS, On November 1, 1989, Alexander died in Philadelphia at the age of 91; and

WHEREAS, At the end of her robust life, Alexander exemplified a woman on a mission to serve her people, advance their position in a country that refused to acknowledge their humanity, and leave a trail for future economists, civil rights leaders, organizers, progressive-reformers, and women-leaders who were genuinely dedicated to picking up the torch of activism. She changed the lives of millions of Americans, people of color and women alike, and more than deserves a national landmark in a city of many firsts honoring an African American of many firsts; and now therefore be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA hereby honors and recognizes Dr. Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, Esq., and calls for the creation and erection of a statue to commemorate her accomplishments and contributions to Philadelphia and beyond.