

The Commemoration of the “School Fight”

On Saturday, May 8, 2010, Mt. Zion A.M.E Church in Devon hosted an event to commemorate the “school fight” of 1932-34, documented in the Spring 2005 Quarterly. Emceed by Vernon Odom of WPVI-TV (Channel 6), the guest speakers included some of the local residents whose families were directly affected at the time, as well as relatives of Raymond Pace Alexander, whose key role is described below. Much credit for this event goes to Ms. Bertha Jackmon, church historian at Mt. Zion.

What follows is the presentation delivered by Roger Thorne, President of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, as well as some thoughts shared by Rich Brake, a member of the Tredyffrin/Easttown school board and Society volunteer.

Seventy-eight years ago this church’s congregation, and the community which it served, felt saddened, betrayed, . . . and defiant. Two months earlier, in March 1932, without warning, a Main Line newspaper article described the unanimous declaration of the school boards of Tredyffrin and Easttown townships that, effective the following September, would segregate the elementary schools of those townships by race.



Mr. Roger D. Thorne, president of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society and author of [Segregation on the Main Line: The “School Fight” of 1932-34](#), presents his overview of the local segregation battle occurring 20 years before *Brown vs. Board of Education*. All photos courtesy of Tony Varlack.

Nothing about the school board’s decision was illegal, however. In 1932 the principle of “separate but equal” remained the law of the land as defined by the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case of Plessy vs. Ferguson. Within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were hundreds of what were called “Union schools” or “Union classrooms,” where black children were taught apart from the other boys and girls within a community. The nearest such classroom was at the Greentree School in Malvern, in nearby Wil-listown township, where all black children grades 1-8 were taught in a single room by one black teacher in an otherwise white school. Yet, since 1834, the townships of Tredyffrin and Easttown had offered fully-integrated public education for all its children, regardless of race or gender. But now, without consensus or referendum, this century-old precedent was being arbitrarily reversed. The almost universal defiance to this new ruling from the local black community, in what would become known as the “*School Fight*,” would last two long and painful years.

On May 16, 2004, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published an excellent article exposing this subject for public scrutiny. I was (and continue as) president of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, the oldest community history organization on the Upper Main Line. I frequently act as the “come-to” person on matters of local history, and yet, as I read this article—with increasing incredulity—I was clueless about this incident. How could an event of this significance, happening not in the Deep South but on Philadelphia’s Upper Main Line, have been totally disregarded as a topic of serious study by our organization? I resolved to remedy that deficiency.

I began by speaking at length with the two fine *Inquirer* reporters who wrote the story. I spoke to many of the participants, and other community residents, some of whom are in this room today and with whom I have become friends. I requested, and was given permission by our School Board, to study the original minutes from that period. I studied the law, many pertinent legal documents, and the relevant history of our Commonwealth and Nation, to provide perspective. This effort, much of it requiring primary research, allowed me to record com-

prehensively, and I believe impartially, what occurred (and did not occur) during those two arduous years of conflict.

My research discovered few “evil villains.” The men who served voluntarily on the two townships’ school boards were not only prominent leaders, but had a record of positively contributing in many ways to this community. Yet, in this particular episode, these men had unanimously allowed stereotypes and prejudice to influence a wrong decision, and then permitted ego and recalcitrance to compound the error, thereby limiting their agility to make a bad decision right.

I also discovered many heroes in the struggle against this unjust decision - a few who would remain well known—and most, completely unsung. Let me tell you about one of each:

By the late spring of 1932, when it became clear that the School Boards were intransigent on their segregation decision, the black community sought a legal recourse. But with a constitutional precedent of “separate but equal,” any legal stratagem with a hope of survival in court would require a most astute legal mind; and those folks cost money. And money, in the third year of the Great Depression, was one resource not in ample supply within the community.

Enter Mr. Raymond Pace Alexander, a 35-year-old Philadelphia attorney with a reputation as a man of formidable intellect: the first black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, and a 1923 graduate of Harvard Law School. His law practice, on Chestnut Street, was in its ninth year. Practicing with Mr. Alexander were three other attorneys, including his wife, the equally talented Sadie Tanner Alexander, the nation’s first black female Ph.D. in economics (University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, Class of 1921); a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Class of ‘27; and a former editor of the *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*.



Dr. Rae Alexander-Minter powerfully presents her reflections on her father, the Hon. Raymond Pace Alexander, who along with her equally accomplished mother, Dr. Sadie (Tanner) Alexander, defended *pro bono* the rights of the black children during the School Fight.

When local community leaders and members of the NAACP brought the impending *School Fight* to Mr. Alexander’s attention, it could have been expedient for him to decline consideration. But not only did he agree to represent the black parents in this decidedly uphill battle, but to lead the charge *pro bono*.

By late summer of 1932, Mr. Alexander and his firm had prepared for submission to the Chester County Court of Common Pleas two restraining writs seeking to invalidate the joint school board’s decision. But there were two serious impediments of which Mr. Alexander was all too well aware. First, no lawyer, whether black or white, could at that time practice or plead a case in Chester County unless he or she was licensed in the county, or had been admitted on a motion of an attorney licensed in the county. Mr. Alexander was not so licensed, and at that time there were no black attorneys licensed to practice at the Chester County Bar. Mr. Alexander sought to persuade several members of the local bar to move the admission on his behalf, but these requests were steadfastly refused. The reason for this refusal was strongly influenced by a second, more political impediment. The chief counsel for the school directors, Colonel A. M. Holding, was also the powerful president of the Chester County Bar Association.

So, with no alternative, Mr. Alexander personally carried his writs to the West Chester Court House. And predictably, in keeping with the rules of the County Bar, the Clerk of the Court of Common Pleas refused to accept them because Alexander was, of course, not a member of the County Bar.

Which leads to our second hero, this one most assuredly unsung. In Mr. Alexander's memoir, he writes (and I quote), "I took my case to the press, publicizing the inability of a Negro lawyer to even have a 'just and proper' complaint filed in court. But one single solitary gentleman of the bar, a [white] former District Attorney of Chester County, came to my support. Thank God for him!" End of quote.

As recently as this very week, a distinguished sitting judge of the Chester County Court personally assisted me in reviewing court documents to learn this hero's identity. I regret that this hero still remains anonymous.

And so, on October 8, 1932, under the auspices of this heroic former D.A., Mr. Alexander filed his two writs of mandamus against the Tredyffrin and Easttown school directors and the supervising principal, on behalf of two little girls, Lille Marie Tyre and Priscilla Temple; two representatives of over 200 black elementary students in our community. The fierce legal battle ground on for another 19 months, becoming increasingly political. In the end, the decision by the school directors to reverse their proposition was made out of court. While not precedent-setting in the way that such decisions of law are established, the ill-conceived segregation plan was reversed, and the sacrifices and hardships of the black community vindicated.

It has been six years since I wrote the article *Segregation on the Upper Main Line*. I have since written many articles on different subjects, and so, after accepting the kind invitation to speak at this important commemoration, I needed the opportunity to thoroughly revisit the available research on this subject. I can truly say that it was indeed my very good fortune to have taken on this project in 2004. The fear of some that probing this story would only stir up old animosities has not occurred. We cannot learn from the past if we do not tell these stories. On a personal note, I am so grateful for the privilege of having gotten to know so many of the participants in this story. Though some have since "crossed over," the struggle and sacrifice of all who participated has now been told, and succeeding generations will know of, and honor, their courage and resilience.

Thank you.

A wide cross-section of the local community was in attendance at the Commemoration, including (far left, wearing a tie) Mr. Thomas Turner who, as a young student in the 1930s, attended the segregated Greentree School in nearby Willistown Township; and (right front) PA State Sen. Andrew E. Dinniman.



Mrs. Bertha Jackmon, historian for the Mt. Zion AMC Church in Devon, and coordinator *extraordinaire* of the Commemoration for the Tredyffrin and Easttown School Fight of 1932-34.



The Value of Local History: Lessons Learned from the School Fight of 1932-1934

Dr. Rich Brake, Member, Tredyffrin/Easttown School Board

On May 8, 2010, I had the distinct pleasure of attending, at Devon's Mount Zion A.M.E. Church, a commemoration of one of the most significant, and largely forgotten, historical episodes in our community's history—the Tredyffrin/Easttown “School Fight” of 1932-1934 (for an excellent account of the entire two-year conflict, I strongly recommend the article in the Spring 2005 issue of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society's *History Quarterly* by Society president Roger Thorne, which can be found online at http://www.tehistory.org/hqda/pdf/v42/Volume42_N1_003.pdf .

There—on the grounds of the church that became the epicenter of local resistance to the effort by the 1930s Tredyffrin and Easttown School Boards to segregate their elementary schools—I was electrified by the spectacle of living history. The packed church was regaled with stories recounting the details of this legal and political fight, many from the mouths of some of the courageous yet ordinary African-American citizens, now in their 80s and 90s, who experienced first-hand the sting of government-sponsored discrimination. I was thoroughly moved by the event as I witnessed the value of understanding and then incorporating the lessons of local history into our present-day lives. It also introduced me to the lead attorney for the black community in the “School Fight,” Mr. Raymond Pace Alexander, whose role in crafting the NAACP's “litigation” strategy for combating the “separate but equal” doctrine has been all but forgotten.

Here is my “take-away” from the commemoration, both as a political scientist, but perhaps more importantly, as a Tredyffrin resident who currently sits on the Tredyffrin/Easttown School Board.

Respect Your Elders. We live in a “new” and “youth” dominated society, with a fixation on trying to resist (and in some respects, deny and diminish) the march of age and time, and the wisdom that comes with it. The School Fight episode reminds us of how much we have to learn from those who came before us, and that history lives in our midst if we only pause long enough to listen to its whispers.

“It” Happened Here. Many of us “Yankees” are taught that racism and discrimination was strictly a “Dixie” phenomenon. The “School Fight” makes clear that there was plenty of more subtle segregation in the North as well, even in a presumably well-educated and tolerant community like Tredyffrin and Easttown Townships. While we should not be paralyzed by a sense of guilt that naturally flows from such a realization, neither should we ignore these hard realities for fear of opening-up old wounds. Only from examining the past will we learn from it.

Politics Makes Strange Bedfellows. Like a great drama, the School Fight had its heroes, villains, and bit-players; and numerous twists and turns. But most importantly, it featured three core elements that must cohere in order to effect real and positive social change: Leadership (both elite and rank & file); Luck; and Compromise.

As for leadership, the role of Raymond Pace Alexander has already been alluded to, but what about the African-American parents who suffered fines and jail-time in their civil disobedience of the state compulsory school laws that would have forced them to send their kids to a new segregated grammar school? Would we have that same kind of courage today?

In terms of luck or serendipity, Mr. Alexander would not have been able to take his case to the Chester County court (where no black lawyers were then admitted to the County Bar), had it not been for a still unidentified

former county district attorney who risked personal and professional reprisal, and supported Alexander's *writ of mandamus*. Without that endorsement, Mr. Alexander's challenge would have been stillborn before it began.

Finally, speaking of compromise, it's ironic what happens when political ambition collides with conventional socio-economic attitudes. Earlier in the spring of 1933, Pennsylvania's attorney general, William Schnader (R), had taken a dim view of the merits of Alexander's legal challenges to Tredyffrin/Easttown's new segregated school plan. Mr. Schnader issued a ruling refusing to intervene on the issue (which the lower court required in order for the case to proceed). However, by 1934 Mr. Schnader had thrown his hat into the ring for the Republican Party's crowded gubernatorial nomination, and suddenly, the wishes (and votes) of black residents in the southeastern part of Pennsylvania became very important to him (it is important to remember that still, in the 1930s, there was a considerable black presence in the state and national GOP coalition). As if by magic, Attorney General Schnader abruptly reversed course and notified the local NAACP branch in Bryn Mawr that he would see what can be done to settle this unfortunate dispute. Political pressure was successfully exerted through various channels, thereby resulting in the Tredyffrin and Easttown school boards discontinuing their controversial segregation agenda in May 1934. For his part, Schnader was able to win the GOP nomination for governor, but eventually lost the general election to Democrat George Earle (of Devon) by a narrow margin of 50% to 48% (Earle became only the second Democrat since the Civil War to win Pennsylvania's governorship). Overall, this entire incident highlights the iron political rule that good intentions are never enough to achieve social improvement, and that cold-hard electoral calculus, leavened by a savvy spirit of coalitional compromise, is often required for reform to take place.

The Perils of Prosperity and Progress. Local officials are always looking to boost the reputation, and ultimately, the economic climate of their communities, and today is no different than in the 1930s (both periods of considerable economic uncertainty and contraction). It is with that in mind that one considers the arguments made by the then president of the Tredyffrin Township school board, Mr. Norman Joy Greene, in support of the new plan to provide separate schools for black and white children for the grade 1-8 grammar schools.

Interestingly, most of Mr. Greene's arguments were couched in an economic development rationale, as well as the conventional wisdom of contemporary educational "experts". For example, Mr. Greene noted that Tredyffrin and Easttown were some of the few remaining townships in the state without "colored" schools, and that the "building-up process" had stagnated as a result. In 1932, Mr. Greene predicted that the board's segregation plan would attract new prospective home owners to this community, and consequently "real estate values should be very much improved" (I am reminded of today's budget woes here in Tredyffrin/Easttown due in large part to a declining real estate market and transfer tax revenue).

Mr. Greene also heavily relied on then-current educational theory which predicted that superior academic performance would naturally accompany the implementation of segregated schooling. President Greene cited the conclusions of then Supervising Principal of all Tredyffrin and Easttown Schools, Wilmer Groff, who made clear that according to "experienced" educators, "colored children progress far more rapidly under colored teachers." It is hard to determine whether this conventional wisdom was merely a convenient smokescreen for more blatant economic or racial motivations, but I believe it is a cautionary example for those who overly rely on the latest educational "fads," as well as allowing short-term economic rationale to permit otherwise good people to conceive and sponsor unjust decisions.

There is so much to learn from this amazing historical event that took place here in our community not so many decades ago. One of the tremendous benefits of studying our local history is that the abstract becomes real, and stuffy concepts in boring history books suddenly become concrete in the names, faces, and places of one's own neighborhood. For my part, I hope my thoughts about the relevance of the Tredyffrin/Easttown School Fight will provide perspective regarding the myriad issues involved in this local struggle for achieving quality educational opportunities for all, a struggle that continues to this day.