ECONOMIST SPOTLIGHT

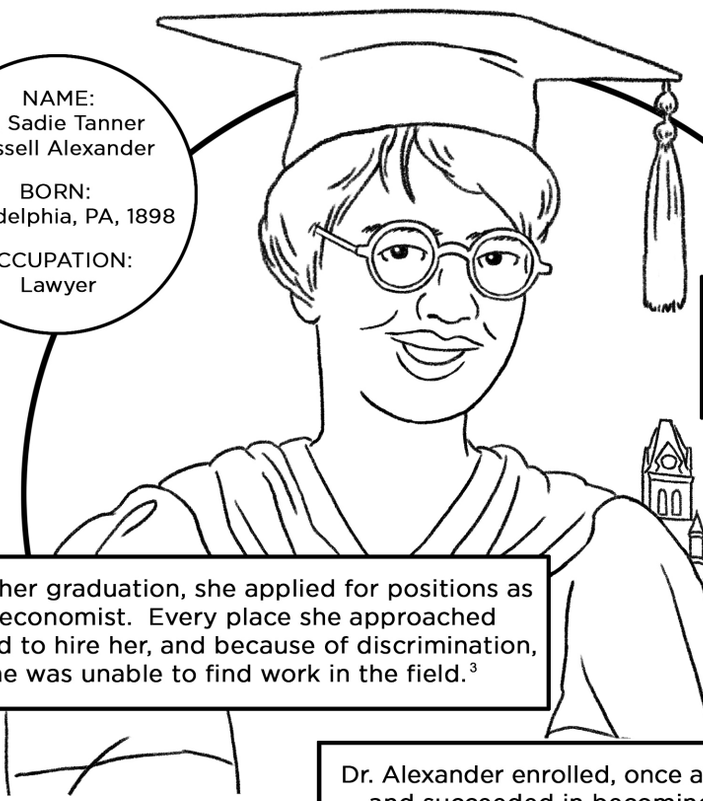
Dr. Sadie T. M. Alexander

The first African American person to obtain a Ph.D. in Economics

NAME:
Dr. Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander

BORN:
Philadelphia, PA, 1898

OCCUPATION:
Lawyer



Dr. Alexander earned her Ph.D., or doctorate degree, at the University of Pennsylvania in 1921.[1]



She was the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. from the university and the second African American woman in the United States with a Ph.D.[2]



Upon her graduation, she applied for positions as an economist. Every place she approached refused to hire her, and because of discrimination, she was unable to find work in the field.[3]

Dr. Alexander enrolled, once again, at the University of Pennsylvania and succeeded in becoming the first African American woman to graduate with a Juris Doctor law degree from the university.[4]

While Dr. Alexander is often celebrated for her law career, her accomplishments in the field of

ECONOMICS

are highlighted by the work of current economists, such as Dr. Nina Banks.

From the 1920s to the 1960s, while practicing law, Dr. Alexander traveled the nation speaking on economic topics. Dr. Banks's research indicates that, despite the barriers set to exclude her from the field, Dr. Alexander's commitment to economic thought could not be stopped.[5]

"Don't let anything stop you," she said. "There will be times when you'll be disappointed, but you can't stop."[6]

ECONOMISTS ASK QUESTIONS!

Accomplished economist **Dr. Sadie T. M. Alexander** asked LOTS and LOTS of questions...

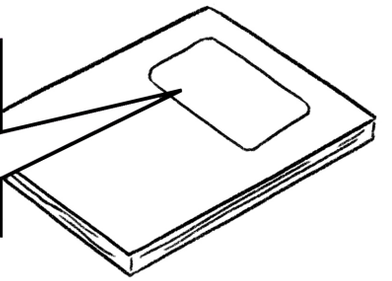


Sadie T. M. Alexander on campus at the University of Pennsylvania.
University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.

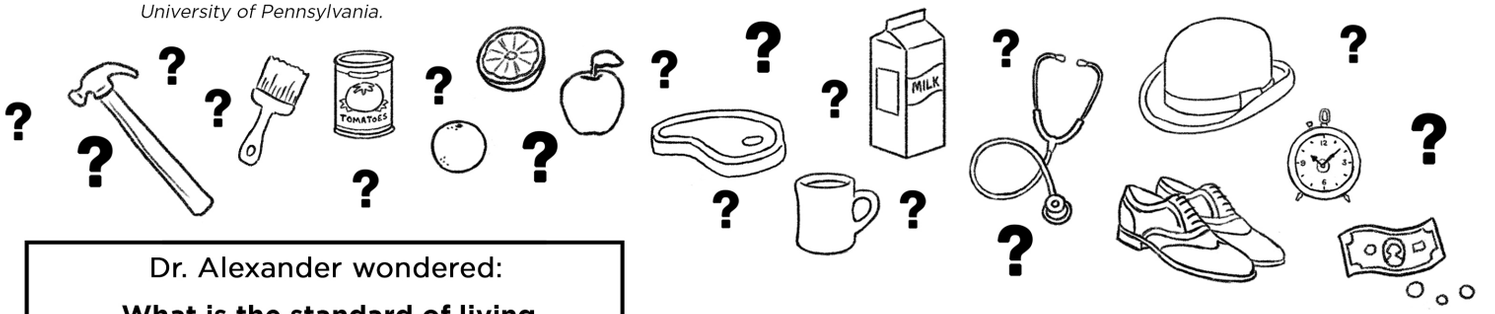
In her dissertation,* she used SMALLER QUESTIONS to find the BIG ANSWERS she was looking for.[7]

*A dissertation (dis-er-tay-shun) is a long essay on a specific topic. It includes original research you conduct to find answers to questions about your topic. You write a dissertation to earn your doctoral degree or Ph.D., and to add the "Dr." before your name, just like Dr. Alexander did.

DISSERTATION TITLE:
"The Standard of Living Among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia"



Dr. Alexander's dissertation focused on some of the early movers of the Great Migration, a group of 100 Black families that left farming areas in the southern United States in 1917 and 1918 to make a home in Philadelphia's 29th ward neighborhood.



Dr. Alexander wondered:

What is the standard of living of these recently settled families?

Or, **what is the level of comfort, material goods, and necessities they could afford** in this industrial city?

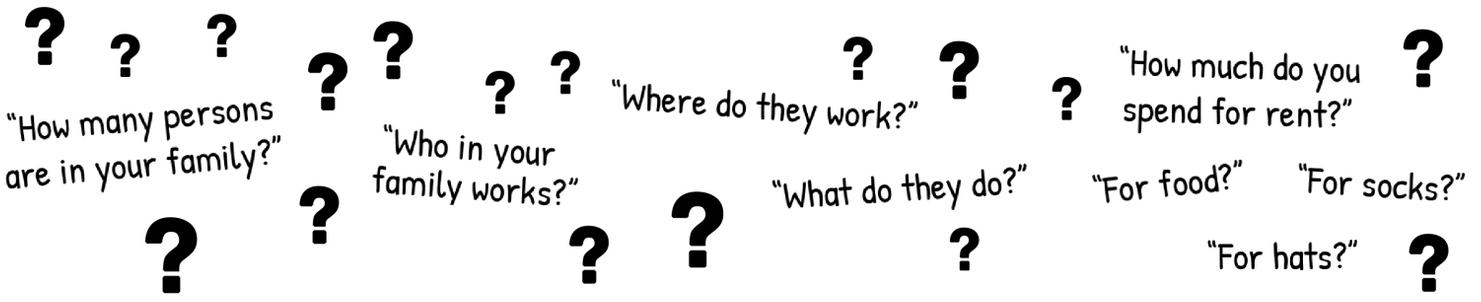
This became her
BIG QUESTION.

To find the answer, she started asking these families lots of SMALLER QUESTIONS.



A southern family arriving north during the Great Migration.
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library.

Dr. Alexander collected 100 families' answers to the following questions:
(And the answers to lots of other questions too.)



With the answers to these SMALLER QUESTIONS, Dr. Alexander was able to answer her BIG QUESTION and calculate the average standard of living for the families of the 29th ward.

She found that many of these families were able to obtain a fair standard of living and some were not. Using her research, Dr. Alexander proposed policies that could improve the standard of living for people in the 29th Ward and beyond.

1. **Why do you think Dr. Alexander's study is an important one?**

_____

_____

_____

2. **Choose one of Dr. Alexander's questions from the top of this page. How does the question you've chosen help answer her BIG QUESTION on page 2?**

_____

_____

_____

3. **Write three new questions you would ask these families to help answer Dr. Alexander's BIG QUESTION.**

a. _____?

b. _____?

c. _____?

Like an economist, you've asked questions that lead to BIG ANSWERS!

If you could research anything, what BIG QUESTION would you ask in your dissertation?

"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." [8]

- Dr. Sadie T. M. Alexander



Dr. Sadie T.M. Alexander, photographed by Judith Sedwick for the Black Women Oral History Project. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

To learn more about Dr. Alexander, look to the work (and tweets!) of **Dr. Julianne Malveaux**, and **Dr. Nina Banks**.

Also, check out **The Sadie Collective**—this group, named in honor of Dr. Alexander, works to increase the representation of Black women in economics and related fields.

1. Thomas G. Potterfield et al., *A Guide to the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander Papers, 1817-1985 (bulk 1920-1983)* (Philadelphia: The University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, 2015), https://archives.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/upt50a374s.pdf.
2. Gerald C. Fraser, "Sadie T.M. Alexander, 91, Dies; Lawyer and Civil Rights Advocate," *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1989, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/03/obituaries/sadie-t-m-alexander-91-dies-lawyer-and-civil-rights-advocate.html.
3. Julianne Malveaux, "Missed Opportunity: Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander and the Economics Profession," *The American Economic Review*, vol. 81, no. 2 (1991), www.jstor.org/stable/2006875.
4. Potterfield, Alexander Papers, 1817-1985.
5. Nina Banks, "The Black Worker, Economic Justice and the Speeches of Sadie T.M. Alexander," *Review of Social Economy*, vol. 66, no. 2 (2008), www.jstor.org/stable/29770460.
6. Greg Johnson, "A Song for Sadie Alexander, A Penn Alumna of Great Esteem," *Penn Today*, February 23, 2017, https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/song-sadie-alexander-penn-alumna-great-esteem.
7. Sadie Tanner Mossell, "The Standard of Living Among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1921), https://www.jstor.org/stable/1015062.
8. Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981. Sadie T. Alexander. OH-31. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass, https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:45166421$24i.

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