

A History of Educators in the Alexander Family – Part 1

Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” This message is represented in the Alexander family, considering their long and significant history of educators in not only Amherstburg, but throughout Essex County and Chatham-Kent. It all stems back to John H. Alexander who was the principal of the King Street School located down the street from the Amherstburg Freedom Museum. John H. Alexander was the son of Thomas and Catherine (Harding) Alexander. Thomas was born in Germantown, Kentucky in 1815 and Catherine was born in Buckingham, England. Thomas came to Canada in 1848, where he was “a highly respected resident of Anderdon.” At the age of nine, Catherine moved from England to Buffalo, New York - an ocean voyage that took six weeks. She later moved to Ohio where she met Thomas. The couple was married on 5 June 1848 and soon after moved to Anderdon, where they had three children: John H., Philip Harding and Martha. Described as “pioneers of Anderdon,” the couple was together for 42 years.

Thomas and Catherine’s daughter, Martha married the Reverend Oscar A. Johnson of Amherstburg, who was the son of Weden Johnson. Martha married a second time, which was to M.E. Simms of Providence, Rhode Island. Thomas and Catherine’s son, Philip, married Emma Jane Lott of Anderdon, but sadly she only lived about a year after their marriage and they had no children. Philip worked in construction and also at the local quarry, but he was best known as one of Amherstburg’s prominent marine chefs. Following his time at the quarry, Philip began his work as a marine chef, even running the kitchen on different boats of the Northern Navigation Company.

Of Thomas and Catherine’s children, John H. Alexander, the teacher and principal of the King Street School in Amherstburg, is the most well-known. He was born on October 15, 1857

in Anderdon, where he also attended public school. From there he entered the Windsor High School and later went to London Normal School, where he received a teaching certificate. He taught from 1878 to 1917 at several schools beginning with Puce and North Buxton in 1878. The following year, in 1879, he taught in Dresden and then the King Street School in Amherstburg. That same year he accepted the position of principal and remained at the King Street School for 30 years. When he first started teaching at the King Street School he had an enrollment of 62 pupils and it was said in the *Amherstburg Echo* that “Because of his ability, his knowledge of youth and his kindly understanding of their difficulties both in and out of school hours he was loved by all his pupils and he set them a sterling example that helped many to win success in both American and Canadian cities.” Included among his students was Thomas Thompson, who was the very first person of African descent to own the Taylor Cabin, located at the Amherstburg Freedom Museum. In 1909, John began teaching in Tilbury and a few years later, in 1912, went back to the place of his birth to teach in Anderdon, a position he held until his retirement from teaching in 1917.

From the information written about John Alexander, he was highly active in his community and a very well-respected man. In 1923, he was elected as an Amherstburg Town Councillor and served from 1923-1926. A few years later, in 1930, he was also appointed Town Assessor, which he did until his death on August 31, 1934. This is in addition to acting as town auditor and Superintendent of the A.M.E. Sunday School for 20 years. John was also known as an excellent public speaker who was in demand at many public gatherings which included Emancipation Celebrations. At a 1928 Emancipation Celebration, John “stressed the hospitality of the town [Amherstburg] and the unique and fitting feature that it was here Eliza and George Harris made famous by Harriet Beecher Stowe found refuge in the early days.”