

A History of Educators in the Alexander Family – Part 3

Before becoming a teacher, Arthur, who was born in Amherstburg on November 2, 1884, worked in several occupations before he became a highly respected teacher and principal. He worked as “the Printer’s Devil” for the *Amherstburg Echo*, which involved an apprentice or errand boy working in a printing office doing tasks such as sweeping and cleaning the ink off the ink rollers. Arthur also worked as a cook on the “Alexander Leslie,” a freighter that sailed the Great Lakes. He used the money he earned on the freighter to further his education.

From there Arthur became a teacher, later a school principal. He taught in the North Buxton area for 40 years at S.S. No. 13 and his dedication to education earned him the Fred L. Bartlett Memorial Award which was given by the Ontario Public School Teachers Association to honour teachers who made a valuable contribution to education in the province. He received the award at the age of 89 and Arthur was the first Black educator to be nominated for the award. It was said that “Mr. Alexander’s outstanding leadership was known far beyond the area” and he “lifted the educational standards of an entire community.” He taught in a one-room school house, later a two- room school house at the Buxton school and was recognized as one of the best educators in the area. This was despite dealing with the racial climate of the time. It has been said that other educators felt that “he would have advanced higher in Ontario education but was limited because he was a black teacher in an era when opportunities were limited to a few segregated schools.” To be recognized for his work through the Bartlett Award despite these obstacles shows his true dedication to education. Arthur never had less than 50 pupils in his class which included eight grades and he loved music. He even used a mandolin as a teaching aid to instruct students on how to sing. According to Arthur, “The mandolin looked like a potato bug ... So that’s what I called it. The students usually got a kick out of that.” Arthur’s grandson

Philip also recalled his father (Philip V.) saying that the school inspectors always made a point of going to the North Buxton School at a time when they would be able to enjoy the performance of “Pirates of Penzance” or other Gilbert and Sullivan productions by Arthur’s students. Arthur retired in 1954 and positively influenced countless student’s lives while teaching.

Arthur was also active in the community considering he was a church deacon for more than 50 years, Superintendent of the Sunday School and chairman of the local Temperance League. He also assisted in the establishment of the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum and was a founding member of the National Unity Association which was responsible for the passage of the Fair Accommodation Practices Act in 1954, which stated that no business could refuse a person based on their “race.” Arthur had the personal philosophy that the world should be viewed with humour and enthusiasm, which is something he incorporated into his career as a teacher, his work in the community, but also his marriage to Ethel May Alexander who was born in North Buxton. She was the daughter of Charles Shreve and Elizabeth Dyke and they had four children: Gloria Roby (Detroit), Philip (Windsor), John Arthur (Chatham-Kent) and Ronald (California). Don’t worry. There is still another part left of the Alexander history. See you next week!