

BAHAMIAN EDUCATORS

ROBERT MELVILLE BAILEY



(Written by Carmen L. Adderley-Bostwick, granddaughter)

Robert Melville Bailey was born in St. John's Barbados on 28th October, 1875. He was the third child, and second son of nine children born to Aaron Benjamin Bailey, a finished carpenter, and his wife, Lenora Moore-Bailey, a seamstress. He was christened on 9th January, 1876 at St. John's Anglican Church, St. John's, Barbados.

He received his primary and secondary education in Barbados. Young Robert excelled as a student and as a result he was awarded a scholarship to study law. Aaron Bailey felt that if his son was to study law with the sons of his wealthy customers, he would lose business. Slavery had not very long ago been abolished and Aaron felt that Robert's pursuit of the legal profession might have given the impression that the Baileys were independently wealthy. Instead, Robert enrolled in Codrington College, Barbados, where he studied the Classics, including Greek,

Latin and Music. Robert M. Bailey was a scholar. He became quite an intellectual, and an accomplished musician. He favoured the violin as his instrument. He was already a master tailor by trade.

At the age of 24, while on a visit to Jamaica, Robert heard about the construction of the Colonial Hotel in Nassau, New Providence, Bahamas. He felt that with so much activity going on, there was bound to be a need for a tailor of his calibre. He arrived at the Vendue Dock, Nassau, Bahamas in 1899, never to return to the land of his birth.

He was not favourably impressed by Nassau, and if a boat was available, would have departed as soon as he arrived. He remained, however and found accommodation at the police barracks with a young Barbadian policeman, Mr. J. C. Jordan, who was to become his best friend.

Around the same time, a young woman, also born in 1875, left Turks Island for New York. Her journey brought her through Nassau, where she met the dashing young Barbadian tailor. Needless to say, she never saw New York. Robert Melville Bailey married Rhoda Adams Simons on 21st October, 1902 at Trinity Methodist Church, Nassau, N. P., Bahamas. The ceremony was performed by Rev. Gastic. That union produced nine children: Joseph Benjamin (1903), Gladys Simons (1904), Rosalie Carmen (1906), Nathaniel Alexander (1907), Millicent Louise (1909), Robert Martin (1911), Arthur Hazelwood (1912), George Kitchener (1915), and Helen Lenora (1917). Of these nine children, three are alive today. They are: Nathaniel Alexander Bailey, Millicent Louise Bailey-Symonette, and Robert Martin Bailey.

Mr. and Mrs. Bailey purchased a home at 35 Dorchester Street, in the city of Nassau where most of their children were born and raised. The home remains as the family homestead until this day.

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Mr. Bailey's first tailor shop was on Marlborough Street near West Street. His second shop was on King Street east of Christ Church Cathedral. He later moved his shop to the Lofthouse Building on Marlborough Street, just west of George Street. His fourth location was on Bay Street where Beaumont House is now located. After the Bay Street Fire in 1942, Mr. Bailey relocated to a shop on his own property at 35 Dorchester Street, just west of the British Colonial Hotel.

He sewed for many of the dignitaries of the country at that time, among them governors, politicians, bishops. Many of these became his personal friends. He counted among his personal friends Mr. W. P. Adderley, father of A. F. Adderley and grandfather of the Honourable Paul Adderley. Mr. Leon Dupuch, first Editor of the Tribune and father of Sir Etienne Dupuch, was also a close friend. In fact, R. M. Bailey was a regular columnist for the evening daily. Sir Walter K. Moore was another one of his clients and associates. Because he was an intellectual his tailor shop was often filled with Members of the House of Assembly and other community leaders, seeking his opinions. Sir Milo Butler was one of those who often sought him out at his sewing machine. Mr. S. C. McPherson was also a close friend and confidant.

His major concern, however, was education. Having received a college education by the turn of the century, it bothered him greatly that there were not even high schools to cater to the needs of the masses in his new homeland. There were a few private schools that educated the chosen few, but the majority of Bahamian children were denied this privilege. R. M. Bailey, therefore, became an advocate for education.

He offered himself as a candidate for the House of Assembly in an attempt to assist in securing high school facilities for Bahamian children. In his election bid, he received the full support of The Tribune. He lost by only one vote to Bay Street merchant Bruce Killroy Thompson. At one point, he used his tailor shop as a classroom to tutor young Bahamian children.

He was instrumental, along with others, in establishing the Cosmopolitan High School. This school was located on the premises of the Aurora Lodge Hall, Charlotte Street, Nassau, N. P. Bahamas. Mr. Bailey and other parents paid teachers out of their own pockets in order to educate their children. The first couple to run the school was Mr. and Mrs. Coffin. The second couple was Mr. and Mrs. Howell, and the third couple was Mr. and Mrs. Graves - all expatriates. This school was only opened for a short time, as the parents found it difficult to continue supporting it financially.

R. M. Bailey was not discouraged, however, and he used his influence with Members of the House of Assembly and other community leaders to lobby for a high school operated by the government. This was a difficult task indeed, but R. M. Bailey saw his dream fulfilled in 1925, when the Government High School opened its doors for the first time.

The Government High School's main purpose was to train future teachers, who were to receive free education. Any other student paid a school fee. The school opened in 1925 with five students, three of whom were teacher trainees. The other two paying students were Mr. Bailey's own children - Millicent Louise and Robert Martin Bailey. His daughter, Helen Lenora Bailey attended Government High School at a later date. When Government High School opened in 1925, its sole teacher was Mr. Albert Woods.

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Robert Bailey joined the United Order of Odd Fellows as a young man, and remained an active member all his life. He rose to the rank of Past Noble Father. He was the musical director of that organization. The Odd Fellows Choir, under his direction, was the first Choir in The Bahamas to perform Handel's Messiah. The performance was staged at Christ Church Cathedral, George Street.

Mr. Bailey, an Anglican, worshipped at Christ Church Cathedral. For a period of years, however, he left the Anglican Church and joined Bethel Baptist Church, Meeting Street. One reason for joining Bethel was to assist them with their educational and musical programmes. He became a trustee of the church, Choir Director and Superintendent of the Sunday School. He trained choirs and musicians. He was a dynamic public speaker, and often held public meetings at Bethel Baptist Church. The purpose of these meetings was to inform the working classes of the issues of the day. Toward this end, he regularly invited politicians and other community leaders to address the audiences gathered for these meetings.

He was a witness to the Burma Road Riot and was called to testify during the inquiry into the Riot. As a result, he was appointed to the first commission appointed by the Governor to investigate labour and wages.

He returned to the Anglican Church in 1948, at age 73. It was time for the younger ones that he had trained to carry on his work. He remained a faithful worshipper at Christ Church Cathedral until his death on 24th June, 1960.

He remained socially active in the community throughout his life. Up until his death, he would spend hours at his sewing machine philosophizing with all those who sought his advice. No doubt, the late Sir Etienne Dupuch and his daughter, Mrs. Eileen Carron of The Tribune would remember such times.

Despite the time given to his country and others, Mr. Bailey never neglected his family. He was a devoted husband and a loving father. His surviving children have fond memories of him as a strict, but caring, disciplinarian. The Bailey children were exposed to music at an early age, three of them - Gladys, Louise and Helen - becoming musicians in their own right. His son, Nathaniel Bailey is a noted Bahamian tailor, trained by his father. One of his daughters, the late Rosalie Carmen Bailey, became a Registered Nurse and well known midwife, who delivered many of this country's leaders.

The fact that his family remains one of the most respected families in this country gives an indication of the stature of the man himself. Among his offspring today are doctors, lawyers, accountants, educators, and other professionals. Noted among his offspring are his grandson, composer of the first Bahamian opera and Director of the National Youth Choir, Cleophas R. E. Adderley, and his granddaughter, President of the Grand Bahama Chamber of Commerce, Mrs. Eva Bailey-Schaffner.

The R. M. Bailey Secondary School was named in his honour.