

“Alexander the Great,” Bridge Builder

by Charles E. Wynes

Archie Alphonso Alexander — “Alexander the Great” to State University of Iowa football fans between 1909 and 1911 — “built bridges and freeways, million-dollar apartments and airfields, power plants and railroad trestles, during his forty-two year career as a design engineer and builder.” Earlier, Alexander had been the first black football player at the University of Iowa and the first black graduate of its College of Engineering. Later, he was the second Republican — and the second black — to serve as governor of the Virgin Islands. He was twice honored by his alma mater: in 1925 he received an honorary degree in civil engineering; and, in 1947 he was hailed as “one of the first one hundred citizens of merit” among the university’s 30,000 alumni. In 1946 Howard University awarded Alexander an honorary doctorate of civil engineering. It was the first such degree awarded by that institution.

In life as in death, however, Alexander was little known in the larger black community. For instance, the 1982 *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, edited by Michael R. Winston and the late Rayford W. Logan, did not include an entry on Alexander. Blacks may be largely unaware of the achievements of Archie A. Alexander because he worked and moved in a predominantly white world. He had, for example, only white partners in his construction firm, Alexander and Repass, which *Ebony* magazine described as the “nation’s most successful interracial business” in 1949. Even Alexander’s longtime personal

secretary, Ilene Dahltorp, was white and in 1949 his oldest employee was a white master mechanic who had joined Alexander’s firm in 1918, just four years after it was founded.

These associations, however, did not make Alexander a “white Negro”: he was not above the race problem; that problem did touch him; and he was very much aware of what it meant to be a Negro in his times. Alexander served as president of both the Des Moines chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the local chapter of the Inter-racial Commission. Moreover, he served as a trustee of both Howard University and Tuskegee Institute, two of the most prominent black institutions of higher learning in America.

Such an uncommon career had its beginnings in an uncommon setting for a black American — in the town of Ottumwa, Iowa, located on the Des Moines River roughly halfway between the city of Des Moines and the point where the small river empties into the Mississippi, at Keokuk. It is roughly ninety miles from Ottumwa to Des Moines, the capital and the largest city in the state.

In the late nineteenth century Ottumwa was a small industrial town devoted chiefly to meat-packing, though there was also a great deal of coal mining in the area. The town itself was neatly divided by the Des Moines River, into North Ottumwa and South Ottumwa. The major business district and the nicer residential areas of the town were located in North Ottumwa, the hill section. South Ottumwa contained the town’s industrial area and the neighborhoods in which the poorer people

lived. Like most of small-town America, Ottumwa was a rather ordinary place in which to be born, to live, and to die. Today's residents like to recall that the novelist Edna Ferber, of *So Big*, *Saratoga Trunk*, and *Giant* fame — among other titles — once lived in North Ottumwa as a child, and even commenced public school there. (Miss Ferber's autobiographical account of her Ottumwa childhood, however, indicated little, if any, fondness for the town on her part.)

It was in South Ottumwa that Archie Alphonso Alexander was born, on May 14, 1888. He was the son of Price and Mary Alexander, members of the tiny minority which made up the black community of Ottumwa. According to the 1890 census, that black community numbered only 467 out of a total population of 14,001. Price Alexander was a janitor and coachman. That bit of occupational information is about all that is known of the Alexanders in Ottumwa until eleven years later, in 1899, when they moved from there to a farm on the outskirts of Des Moines where Price Alexander again found employment as a janitor, this time in a bank.

For the rest of his life, Archie Alexander would call Des Moines home. There he attended Oak Park grammar school and Oak Park High School from which he graduated in 1905. He then attended Highland Park College and the Cummins Art School before entering the State University of Iowa, in Iowa City, in 1908.

Alexander had lived in a white world in Ottumwa, and an even whiter one in Des Moines. In the 1890 census, Ottumwa's black population represented 3.33 percent of the town's total population of 14,001. Des Moines, according to the same census, had only 1,149 Negroes, or 2.29 percent of the city's total population of 50,093.

Perhaps, then, it came as no surprise to Alexander to find himself the only Negro in the College of Engineering at the State University

of Iowa. Actually, he was the first. Upon entering, he was even warned that "a Negro could not hope to succeed as an engineer," while the dean reportedly said that he had "never heard of a Negro engineer." But Alexander first had to succeed as an engineering *student*, which he did, in spite of the fact that he had to work his way through the university at a variety of part-time jobs. He also found time to star on the varsity football team during his last three years at the university — the first black to play football for the university — and to pledge Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, which he later served as national president. It was as a tackle on the football field, however, that he earned the sobriquet "Alexander the Great."

When Alexander graduated in 1912, it did appear as though "a Negro could not hope to succeed as an engineer," since every engineering firm in Des Moines turned down his requests for employment in that capacity. So he took a twenty-five cents per hour laborer's job in a steel shop with the Marsh Engineering Company of Des Moines. Two years later, in 1914, when he left to establish his own company, he was earning \$70 a week — as an engineer, in charge of bridge construction for the company in both Iowa and Minnesota.

It was while working for the Marsh Engineering Company that Alexander had met a white engineer, George F. Higbee. In 1917 Higbee joined Alexander's firm as a partner, the firm name being changed from A.A. Alexander, Inc., to Alexander and Higbee. The firm specialized in building bridges, viaducts, and sewage systems throughout Iowa. The partnership endured and prospered, until 1925 when Higbee was killed in a construction accident.

For the next four years Alexander continued the business alone. It was during this period that Alexander received several large contracts for construction projects at his alma mater.

The State University of Iowa's new heating plant in December 1927. Alexander received the contract to build the Proudfoot, Bird and Rawson-designed plant. (courtesy University of Iowa Archives, Iowa City)



These included the university's new heating plant, built in 1926, the new power plant, built in 1928, and the under-the-Iowa River tunnel system, also built in 1928.

Then, in 1929, Maurice A. Repass, another white engineer, joined him as a junior partner in the renamed firm of Alexander and Repass. Repass and Alexander had been classmates at the State University of Iowa where they had played football together. At the time that Repass joined Alexander, he was an instructor in the department of mechanics and hydraulics at his alma mater.

Over the years, Alexander worked to "keep up with his field." In 1921 he had actually turned supervision of the firm over to Higbee while he, Alexander, attended a post-graduate course in bridge design at the University of London.

Ebony magazine claimed in 1949 that the Alexander and Repass construction company was the "nation's most successful interracial business." It certainly was successful. In the firm, Repass was the "inside man," checking contracts and handling the day-to-day details of running the business, while Alexander was the "outside man," making the contacts, seeking out the contracts, and representing the com-

pany in the business and engineering worlds. Alexander said that he found his race but "little handicap" in his role, while Repass boasted, "I have met with no adverse criticism, but [rather] have been commended many times for my choice of partners." At the same time, Alexander's white secretary, who served in both the Des Moines and Washington, D.C., offices of Alexander and Repass, said that her white friends "had better not say anything about my working for a Negro."

Over the years, the firm of Alexander and Repass completed projects in most of the then forty-eight states. By 1950 the total number of projects completed since the company's original founding in 1914 exceeded three hundred. Alexander once claimed in testimony before a congressional committee that he and Repass ran a "\$6 million outfit," and at least one friend described Alexander's Des Moines home as a "palace." Yet, he was not an inordinately wealthy man, since by 1950 his reputed net assets were only in the neighborhood of a half-million dollars.

Perhaps the most prominent of the many large projects completed by Alexander and Repass — but only because they were in the

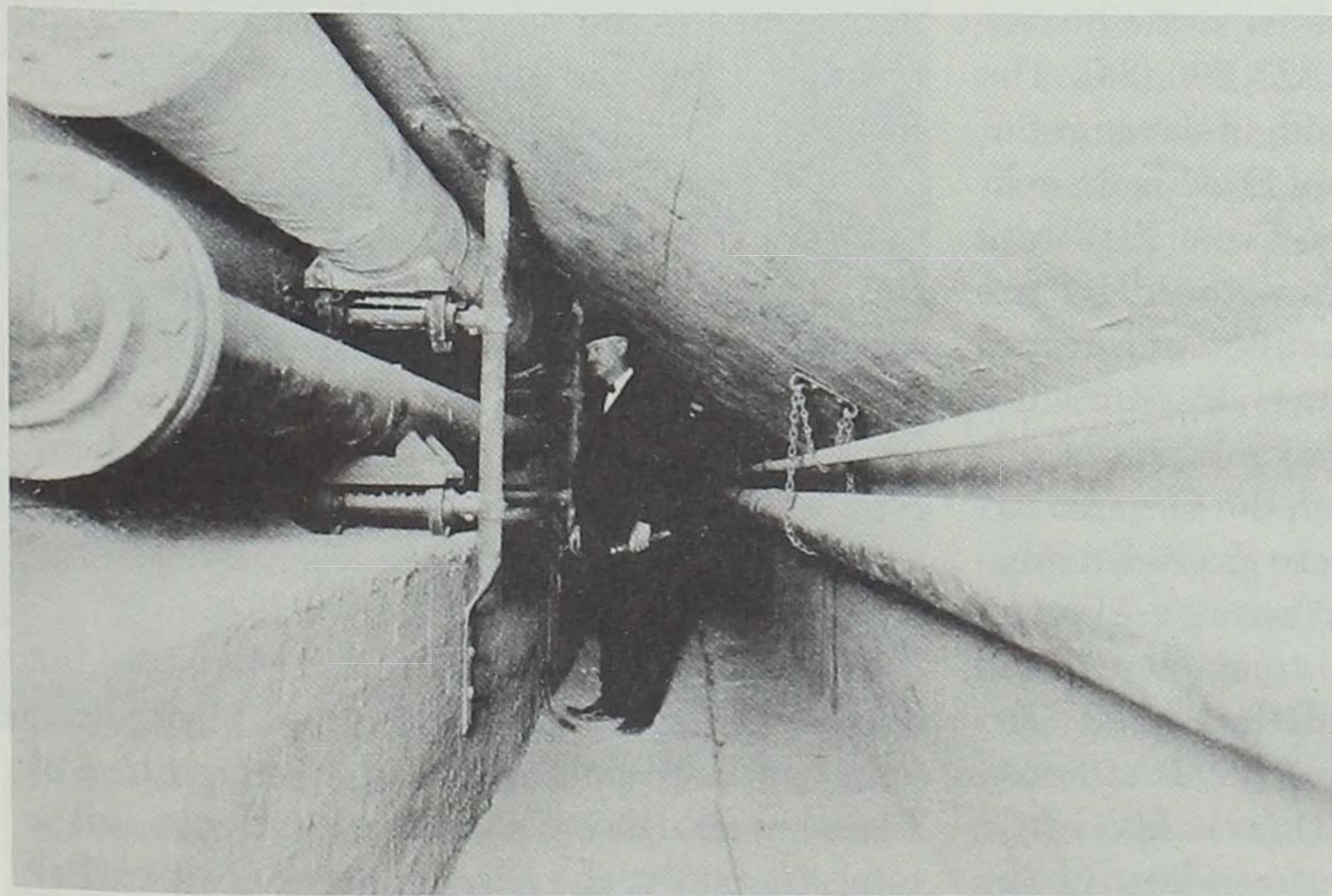
nation's capital, and not because they were necessarily the most technically difficult or challenging—were the Tidal Basin Bridge and Seawall, the K Street elevated highway and underpass from Key Bridge to 27th Street, N.W., and the Whitehurst Freeway along the Potomac River which carried traffic around Georgetown. The \$3,350,000 Whitehurst Freeway project required the labor of some two hundred workers for two years.

When Alexander, a racial activist even in the 1940s, ran afoul of District of Columbia union rules that required separate drinking facilities and separate restrooms for white and black workers, he neatly skirted the issue by implementing the use of paper drinking cups and by labeling the two restrooms “skilled” and “unskilled.” Thus Alexander did not have to desert his principles, while the unions were almost completely satisfied because only five of the largely black construction crew were skilled workers. That fact in itself was evidence of another union policy that kept blacks from becoming apprentices in the skilled trades.

In politics, unlike most blacks after the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 and the coming of the New Deal, Alexander

remained a lifelong Republican. It was no wonder, for not only did he come from a part of the country where the Republican party was the majority party, but he was also a wealthy man by any standard, and one who regularly dealt or associated with the “movers and shakers,” or, as some would say, the “country club set.” Alexander did not just vote Republican. He was an active Republican, who twice—in 1932 and 1940—served as assistant to the chairman of the Iowa Republican State Committee, and early in 1952 he joined the “Eisenhower for President” movement. Thus it was not surprising that when Eisenhower was elected he found an office for this black man from Iowa, a state which was represented in the United States Senate at the time by both a Republican, Bourke B. Hickenlooper, and a Democrat, Guy M. Gillette. The post, however, was as governor of the largely black Virgin Islands.

The appointment was a disaster for all concerned. It may well have hastened Alexander's death. It was to prove an immense embarrassment for Eisenhower and the Republican party. And finally, the Virgin Islanders were adversely affected since Alexander's personality and policies tended to exacerbate relations between the inhabitants and the federal



Alexander also received the contract to build the tunnel system under the Iowa River to pipe steam, water, and electricity from the power plant to the west campus. In the 1928 photograph, the tunnel's designer, S.U.I. Professor B. P. Fleming of the College of Engineering, inspects the work. (courtesy University of Iowa Archives, Iowa City)



Virgin Islands Governor Archie A. Alexander waves to spectators after taking his oath of office, April 9, 1954. (courtesy Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City)

government in Washington, D.C.

The United States Virgin Islands — comprised of some fifty-odd small islands or cays with a total area of only 133 square miles — were acquired from Denmark for strategic reasons in 1917 for the sum of \$25,000,000. The population was largely Negroid, of slave origin, but there was also a minority of Danish, Dutch, French, and English ancestry. From 1917 until 1931 the islands were administered by the Navy Department. They were then transferred to the Interior Department. In 1927 the islanders were granted United States citizenship, and in 1936, through the Organic Act of the Virgin Islands, they were granted a measure of self-government through elected municipal councils which, in turn, constituted the legislative assembly for all the islands. The office of chief executive, once civil authority had been established in 1931, was filled by a governor appointed by the president of the

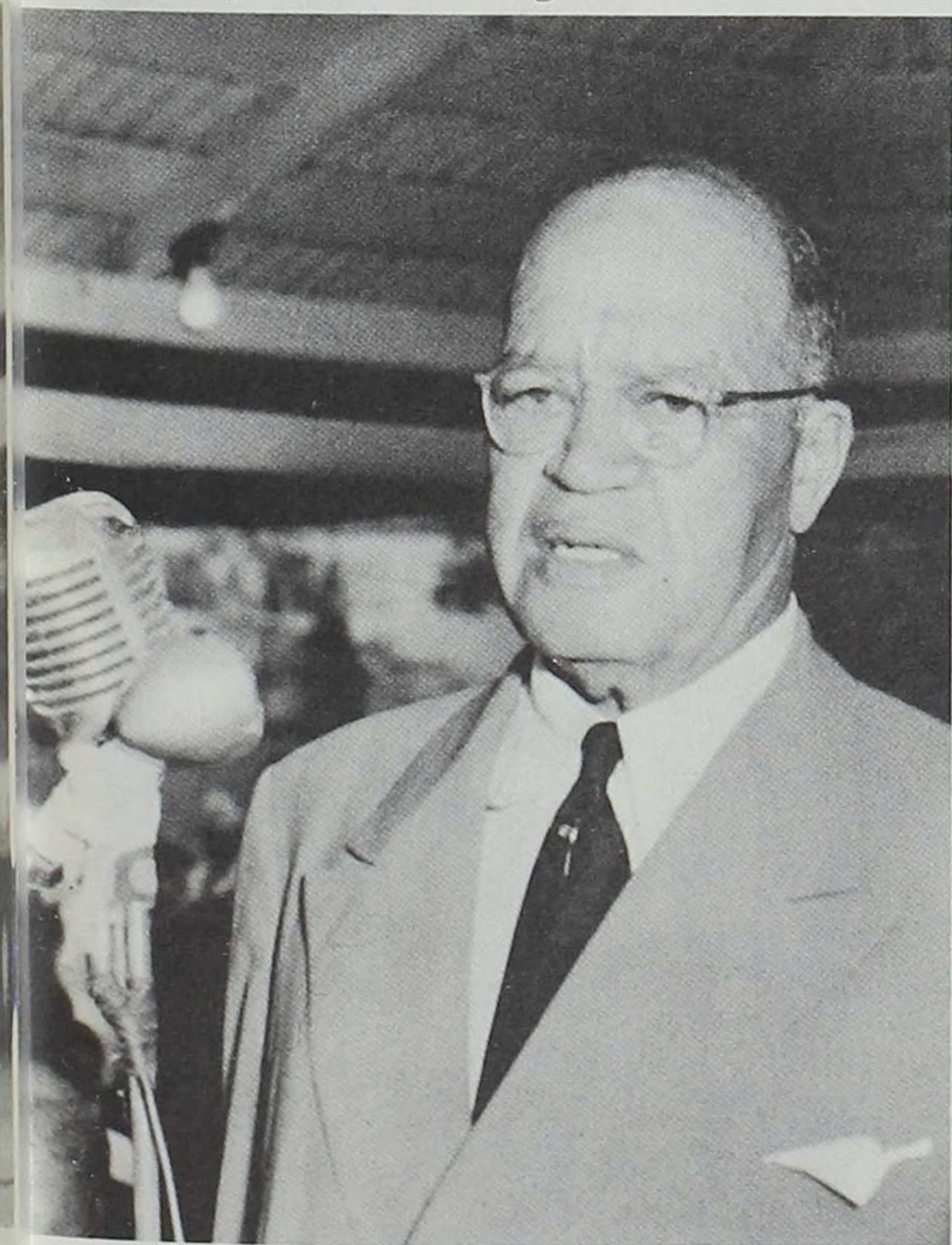
United States. In 1954, following years of agitation by the islanders, the Organic Act of 1936 was replaced by a revised Organic Act which changed the makeup and size of the legislative body, but left the governorship an appointive position, much to the chagrin of the Virgin Islanders.

Always poor, and economically dependent upon sugar, rum, bay rum, cattle, and tourists, the islanders relied on federal financial assistance to such an extent that conservative critics on the mainland referred to them as “wards of the nation.” Unfortunately, these critics later included within their ranks the governor-designate of the islands, Archie Alphonso Alexander.

Of course, Alexander had received his appointment as a prominent Iowa Republican who had been among the early supporters of Eisenhower. Even so, Alexander was not a total stranger to the islands. Some years earlier

he had organized and become the first president of American-Caribbean Contractors, which had done construction work in Venezuela and Puerto Rico, and had unsuccessfully sought contracts for sewage disposal plants in the Virgin Islands. Later, Alexander and his wife had vacationed in the islands and thus escaped several cold Iowa winters.

In 1954 the Virgin Islanders needed a governor with the image of President Eisenhower himself — someone warm, outgoing, and almost universally trusted, even by his enemies. What they got in Alexander, however, was a governor cut in the mold of another Iowan by birth, ex-President Herbert Hoover; both men appeared to be doctrinaire, cold personally, and distrusted for reasons that were not always clear. The Virgin Islanders needed a



Governor Alexander delivering his inaugural address. (courtesy Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City)

warm and outgoing governor for two reasons: (1) because the government of the islands was about to undergo significant change under the revised Organic Act of 1954 which went into effect just two months after Alexander's inauguration; and, (2) he would be replacing as governor the popular Morris F. de Castro, the first native governor of the islands. Alexander, though black, seemed to represent a backward step to the majority of Virgin Islanders, while the tiny minority of whites were uneasy with the idea of a black governor. There had been only one black governor before Alexander.

Alexander, as a regular, black Horatio Alger, who had conquered the adversities of both poverty and race, was the personification of the Protestant work ethic. Now he was being sent to govern a population of somnolent, dreamy Caribbean islanders. A later scholar-critic wrote that Alexander was a "midwestern Babbit who brought all the values of small-town America to the Caribbean." The same critic said that Alexander brought with him "an openly contemptuous attitude toward the local people, a brash manner more befitting a gang foreman than a diplomat, and a complete inability to comprehend the subtleties of West Indian intercourse."

Such harsh criticism was not far off the mark. Even at the Senate hearing preceding his confirmation Alexander had referred to the Virgin Islanders as "mendicants" and "wards of the United States." Rather than repeatedly extending their hands outward for more United States support, he had suggested that the islanders should "tighten their belts and go to work."

Word of all this, of course, had preceded Alexander to the islands, and it was a tribute to the Virgin Islanders' hospitality that they received him as warmly as they did. For instance, when Alexander arrived at the airport of the capital city, Charlotte Amalie, the name over the main terminal, "Harry S. Truman



Governor and Mrs. Alexander on the steps of the Government House during carnival. (courtesy Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City)

Airport," had been shrouded tactfully with a welcome banner. Outside the terminal, Alexander clambered to the top of a crimson, Chevrolet convertible and led a brass-band parade up Crown Prince Street and down Queen Street to the Emancipation Garden where the Danes had freed the slaves in 1848. There, on April 9, 1954, Alexander was sworn in as governor of the islands, ninety-one percent of whose 26,665 inhabitants were black.

Alexander's administration never had even a short honeymoon period. Indeed, his tenure in office lasted only sixteen months. Alexander later claimed that most of his troubles stemmed from the fact that the revised Organic Act of 1954 did not provide for an elected governor. As the appointed governor, he found himself facing a "hostile legislature" from the very beginning, and soon both Democrats and Republicans were calling for him to give up his office, especially after he vetoed the appropriations bill for 1955.

Alexander's island critics further accused him of being "too firm" with the native population, and of appointing too many non-islanders to administrative posts at inflated salaries. A. Melchoir, editor of the *St. Thomas Daily News*, said that Alexander was "a good man but not a [proper] government official. He needs under him men who know about government and share his courage. At the moment [his administration] looks like a little circus."

The truth was that Alexander was used to running his own construction company, with no board of directors to be responsible to. Unfortunately, he believed he could run a country the same way. But he now had a board of directors, that is, the legislature, and the legislators not only said "no" at times, they became a focal point of opposition to the governor. Among the populace, on the other hand, there was supposedly much praise for Alexander. Many of the leading residents — more concerned with profits than with self-govern-

ment — declined to take sides in the growing political furor, and simply credited Alexander with "good intentions." In short, Alexander might have made a good, perhaps even a popular, benevolent dictator. But in the mid-1950s the days of benevolent dictators, even popular ones, were all but over.

Legislative investigation of the Alexander regime led to accusations of: the illegal expenditure of official funds for travel and entertainment of friends and "cronies"; the entering into "excessive and ridiculous contracts" with regard to the perennial freshwater problem; the allocation of funds "without regard to legislative intent"; the issuance of gag-orders for government employees in relation to questions raised by the legislature; the use of government furniture, including lunchroom equipment purchased for the new high school, in the private homes of officials; and the use of "rude and obscene" language, as well as threats, in dealing with his political enemies.

Finally, Alexander was accused of creating a new corporation with some of his business associates, then giving it the use of government-owned equipment, and arranging for it to purchase crushed rock at a low price. Such arrangements would have guaranteed a successful low bid and the winning of a contract for the construction of a half-million dollar, waterfront highway project. The Interior Department subsequently canceled any invitation to the new (and supposedly favored) company to bid on the project. But Alexander was to claim that he had initiated the cancellation because the whole business had become tainted.

The first, and last, anniversary of the Alexander regime was celebrated in Charlotte Amalie on April 9, 1955, with a call for his resignation. Meanwhile, Alexander was observing that anniversary back in Des Moines where, on April 11, he announced that he was "not in the least" worried about attempts to oust him. "It's a small group," he said of those who sought his removal, one that "wants to

control things its own way." Then in the typically blunt style of the man, Alexander continued, "They don't want discipline; and that's what I've been giving them." Alexander was proving to be the wrong man in the wrong job in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The next day, April 12, Alexander returned to Charlotte Amalie, where he was admitted to the Knud Hansen Memorial Hospital for a checkup. He now had little hope of continuing as governor of the Virgin Islands. His opponents wanted him out because they could not work with him. The Eisenhower administration wanted him out to avoid further unfavorable publicity or embarrassment. So Governor Alexander and President Eisenhower engaged in an exchange of correspondence. On August 10, Alexander wrote the president about a "recent heart attack" and offered the "urgent admonitions of my medical advisers" as grounds for the president's acceptance of his resignation. The president, on August 18, replied, accepting Alexander's resignation and dutifully expressing his "appreciation of the many excellent services you have performed," as well as assuring him of his "best wishes for an early return to complete health." The very next day the administration announced the appointment of Walter A. Gordon, black, of Berkeley, California, as Governor Alexander's successor.

Alexander's brief and misguided foray into the world of the political office seeker was over. He was ailing and at the age of sixty-seven he was no longer physically able to be a mover and shaker. But as he looked back over the road of his life — as he must have done — what he saw was probably pleasing to him, with the raucous sixteen-month interlude in Charlotte Amalie a matter of little import. Undoubtedly, more important to him were the memories of his boyhood in Ottumwa, of the years of his youth and his manhood in Des Moines and Washington, D.C., of the struggles and successes, achievements and rewards, and above

all, of the recognition which had come to him as an American who had made his dreams come true.

On January 4, 1958, Alexander died of a heart attack at his Des Moines home, 2200 Chautauqua Parkway, which was situated on land once owned by Highland Park College. When Alexander had turned out for the Highland Park football team in 1905, the college's president had rebuffed him with a remark that he already had all the education he needed, and that he should get a job as a janitor.

Alexander's estate was worth \$140,505. In his will, Alexander directed that whatever was left from a trust fund established for Mrs. Alexander should, at her death, be divided equally among the University of Iowa, Tuskegee Institute, and Howard University for engineering scholarships. Mrs. Alexander died in 1973, and in 1975 each of the three institutions received \$105,000.

Thus passed Archie Alphonso Alexander of Ottumwa and Des Moines, a man who in not heeding the advice of his college president made the most of his education. □

Note on Sources

Alexander's personal papers are held by the Special Collections Department of the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City. The collection includes little personal correspondence, however, and consists mostly of trustees' records from Howard University and articles and clippings about Alexander. The *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, vol. 49 (New York, 1966), pp. 252-53, includes the best published sketch about Alexander's life. The information it contains was checked for accuracy by both Mrs. Alexander and Maurice Repass. There is another sketch in *Current Biography, 1955* (New York, 1955), pp. 9-11. Also, an autobiographical sketch was prepared by Alexander for his nomination hearing: U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *The Nomination of Archie A. Alexander to be Governor of the Virgin Islands*. 83d Cong., 2d sess., 1954. Of greater value, however, were articles in *Ebony* magazine in April and September 1949; *Time* magazine for April 19, 1954; the *New York Times* for April 11, 1954, April 12, 13, 18, and August 18 and 19, 1955; the *Des Moines Tribune* for November 25, 1947; the *Grand Rapids Herald* for October 4, 1954; and the *Des Moines Sunday Register* for January 5, 1958. On Alexander in the Virgin Islands, see Gordon K. Lewis, *The Virgin Islands: A Caribbean Lilliput* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), and William W. Boyer, *America's Virgin Islands: A History of Human Rights and Wrongs* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1983).