

MATTHEW JAMES ROBINSON, SR.

(1898-1979)

Businessman, Educator and Civic Leader

Matthew James Robinson Sr. was an extraordinary businessman and community leader whose entrepreneurial spirit helped build a family business that has spanned five generations.

Robinson was born in West Point in King William County, Virginia to Daniel S. and Roxanna Blueford Robinson. He was reared in Richmond where his family moved during his infancy. According to the family's oral history, Robinson was greatly inspired by his paternal grandfather, George Benjamin Robinson, an ex-slave who had learned the art of broom making and had attained an education after the Civil War. Young Daniel S. Robinson started the Imperial Broom Company in 1900 and young Matthew began working in the broom factory with his father at age 12. He also attended school and graduated from Van de Vyver School in Richmond, Virginia. This all-black Catholic school offered a variety of academic, vocational and business courses that would prove pivotal in Robinson's adult life.



After high school, Robinson earned a law degree from the Hamilton College of Law in Chicago, Ill. He also earned a certificate in industrial arts instruction and a certificate from the Washington School of Real Estate and Insurance. In 1918 Robinson married Carrie Miller and to this union three children were born.

Robinson took over the operation of the broom company in 1938, while his father remained on as company chairman. During that same year, Robinson began his career as an educator. He taught at Fair Oaks Elementary School and later at Gravel Hill Elementary School, both in Henrico County. Robinson also operated a school bus that served the youngsters of the county's Fairfield and Varina districts.

Around 1941, Robinson joined the faculty of Virginia Randolph Training School in Glen Allen, where he would have a monumental impact upon legions of students. As an industrial arts teacher he taught manual trades to students from across Henrico County during segregation and prepared them for productive lives as adults. He retired from Virginia Randolph High School in 1964.

Robinson used his business acumen and leadership skills to start the Matthew J. Robinson Realty Company and served as its president until 1975. He was the founding president of the Henrico Teachers Association Federal Credit Union and served as president of the Henrico NAACP. In addition, Robinson was a faithful member and leader in New Bridge Baptist Church. As a result of his sustained efforts to secure recreational facilities for the residents of his community, known as Bungalow City, Robinson Park was dedicated in his honor in 1982 in eastern Henrico County.