



ESSI MATILDA FORSTER

First Woman Lawyer in Ghana





As narrated by her daughter,
Estelle Appiah (née Forster)

Photo credits: Forster family archives

For more information on George James Christian, read:
[Returned Exile: A Biographical Memoir of George James
Christian of Dominica and the Gold Coast, 1869-1940](#)

by

Margaret D. Rouse-Jones (Author)
Estelle M. Appiah (Author)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Essi Matilda Forster is a hidden gem in the history of Ghana's legal profession and is unknown to many as the first woman lawyer in Ghana (under the Gold Coast), and the third woman lawyer in British West Africa.

Essi Matilda Forster's life and legacy as captured by her daughter, Estelle Appiah, provides a deep historical account of her life and legacy. The Institute for African Women in Law expresses gratitude to Estelle Appiah for sharing this rich historical account of an iconic woman in law.

As the legal profession in Ghana continues to grow, and more women become lawyers, the roots of women's entry into the profession in Ghana can be traced to pioneers such as Essi Matilda Forster.

We hope you enjoy reading this mini autobiography.

*J.Jarpa Dawuni, Ph.D.
Executive Director*

Essi Matilda Forster (née Christian) came from a very interesting background. Her father was West Indian, and her mother was African—from the Gold Coast. Her father, George James Christian, came from Dominica in the Eastern Caribbean and went to study law in the UK, at Gray's Inn, in 1898. He attended the first Pan-African Congress in London in 1900 and was inspired by that and Pan-Africanism to come and seek his fate in the Gold Coast.

George James Christian arrived in the Gold Coast in 1902 where he had a very successful career in law as well as in politics. Interestingly, although he did not come from the Gold Coast, he represented the people of the Western Province in the Legislative Council for 10 years, from 1930–1940. He educated the majority of his children in the UK and he had quite a number because he had a family in the West Indies before he came to the Gold Coast.



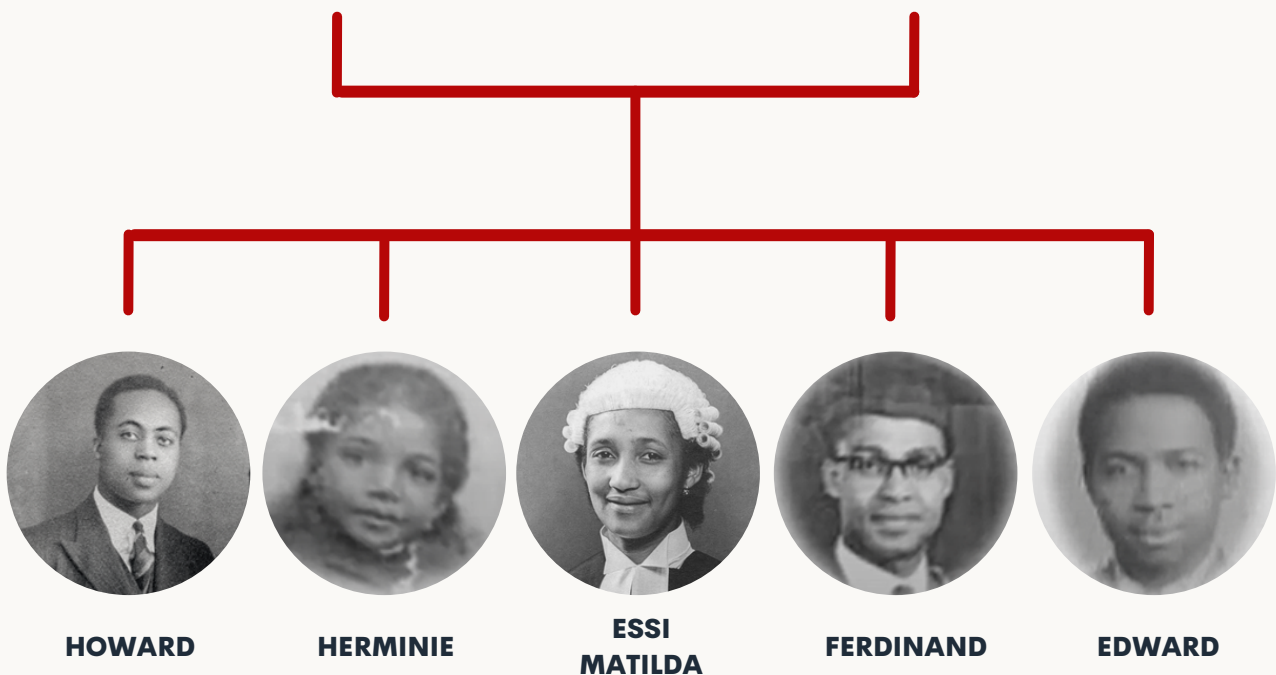
GEORGE JAMES CHRISTIAN

Essi Matilda Forster's father



ABBA LUCY FRENCH (MAMI ABBA)

Essi Matilda Forster's mother





GEORGE JAMES CHRISTIAN AND HIS CHILDREN AT SCHOOL IN THE UK

Essi Matilda was born in 1922, and she was sent to school in England in 1927 at the age of five. When she left the Gold Coast, she did not speak English and when she returned to the Gold Coast in 1947, she had lost her mother tongue. Essi's mother, Mami Abba French, did not see her for the period from 1927 to 1947; however, she saw her father frequently because he would visit the UK in connection with his legal work and his business. He was a businessman as well as a politician.

In 1940, Essi Christian had to decide on what career path she was going to follow. She was very much influenced by her father as well as her older brother, Howard and decided to become a lawyer. In 1942, she entered Gray's Inn to study to become a barrister and she qualified as a barrister in 1945.



ESSI MATILDA CHRISTIAN WITH HER BROTHER, HOWARD CHRISTIAN



ESSI MATILDA CHRISTIAN CALLED TO THE BAR

She got married in December 1944 to Dr. E.F.B. Forster, who was also a pioneer. He was the first African psychiatrist south of the Sahara and came from The Gambia. They decided to settle in The Gambia in 1947, where Essi Matilda Forster practiced law and lived from 1947–1951, after which they came to Gold Coast, now Ghana. They came to the Gold Coast mainly because her husband, Dr. E.F.B. Forster was invited by the Gold Coast administration to practice psychiatry in the Gold Coast. As such, they relocated and that began Essi's legal career in the Gold Coast in 1951, although she had been called to the bar in the Gold Coast in 1947 whilst on a visit to the motherland.



PROF. AND MRS. EFB FORSTER



**FOREIGN TRAVELS WITH
THE FORSTER FAMILY**



**PROF. AND MRS. EFB FORSTER
AT A SOCIAL FUNCTION**



**ESSI FORSTER WITH
HER YOUNG CHILDREN**

Essi worked briefly as the Registrar of Companies before she joined Mobil Oil Corporation in 1957, where again, she was a pioneer. She set a precedent for lawyers to be engaged by corporations to head their legal departments rather than use private practitioners on retainer. She worked for Mobil Oil Ghana Ltd for 25 years from 1957 to 1982.

Essi was not only the first woman lawyer in the Gold Coast called to the English Bar in 1945; she was the third woman lawyer in West Africa, following Stella Marke Thomas in Nigeria (1935) and Frances Claudia Wright in Sierra Leone (1941). At the time of her death in 1998, Essi Forster was the most senior lawyer at the Ghana Bar.



**ESSI FORSTER WITH CHIEF JUSTICE AZU CRABBE,
THE FIFTH CHIEF JUSTICE OF GHANA (CENTER)**



**ESSI FORSTER
IN THE OFFICE**



ESSI FORSTER FEATURED IN MOBIL NEWS

Apart from being a trailblazer as a pioneer and the first woman lawyer in the Gold Coast, Essi Forster had many accomplishments to her credit. Her public service included an appointment on the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation Board and she was also the chairperson of the Nurses and Midwifery Council. With regards to voluntary work, she was very active in the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and in that connection, she was instrumental in the enactment of two critical laws in the 1980s. These were the Intestate Succession Decree and the Head of Family Accountability Law. These were very important social policy laws that improved the welfare of widows, who hitherto had been treated badly according to customary law.



WOMEN LAWYERS FIGHT DISCRIMINATION



VOLUNTARY WORK AT INNER WHEEL CLUB MEETING

Essi was also involved in the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and very engaged in the Girl Guides Association. Apart from that, she was a member of the Accra Ridge Church, where she served as the Secretary for the Accra Ridge Church Sunday school for about 25 years.

Essi had a very full life and lived by example. As far as her profession was concerned, she set the pace for the engagement of in-house lawyers by corporations through her employment by Mobil Oil Ghana Limited. She was effectively the gateway for women in corporate Ghana.



**ESSI FORSTER ATTENDING A WOMEN
LAWYERS CONFERENCE ABROAD**



**PRESENTATION TO QUEEN ELIZABETH II
AT THE YWCA**



**ESSI FORSTER IN
HER LATER YEARS**

FAMILY LEGACY

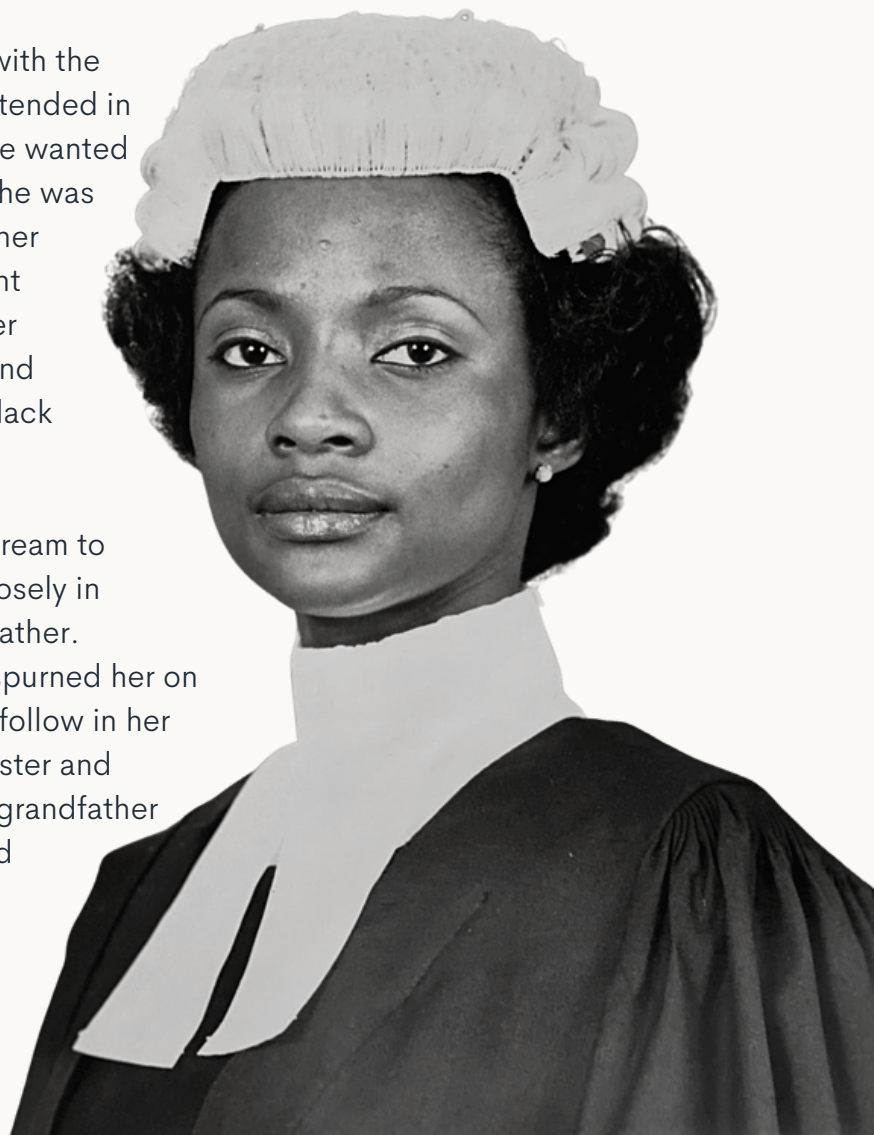
Essi inspired many women, including her daughter, Estelle Matilda Appiah. As a young child, Estelle wanted to be just like her mother. Estelle describes her mother as being "someone who did not care very much about elegant dressing or domestic work" but made sure that everything in the house ran smoothly.

Estelle admired her mother's patriotism. She can vividly remember her mother sitting on a chair in their home and saying "I love my Ghana." This was despite the fact that her mother grew up in the UK where she was sent to school at a tender age and despite the fact that she was half West Indian.

Estelle saw her mother as a fantastic role model and wanted to be just like her in many ways. As Estelle recounts, law was very much a matter of family tradition. Inspired by her mother, Estelle chose to be a third generation lawyer following the steps of her grandfather and mother.

Estelle recalls a conversation she had with the principal of the boarding school she attended in the UK. When she told the principal she wanted to be a lawyer, the principal thought she was joking and actually asked her whether her mother was really a lawyer! This incident illustrates the important role Essi Forster played as a pioneer, shattering racial and gender stereotypes and barriers that Black women faced during those times.

Estelle was not one to give up on her dream to continue the family legacy following closely in the footsteps of her mother and grandfather. The doubt expressed by her principal spurned her on even more and she was determined to follow in her mother's footsteps and become a barrister and member of Gray's Inn not only like her grandfather and mother, but also her uncle, Howard Christian and brother Bankie Forster.



**ESTELLE CALL
TO THE BAR**

Fortunately, Estelle was able to achieve the target she set for herself and went on to have a very successful and fulfilling career in legislative drafting, working for the government of Ghana at the Attorney-General's Department of the Ministry of Justice for twenty two years. She retired as the Director of Legislative Drafting in 2011. As the Director of Legislative Drafting, Estelle was responsible for all the legislation of the Republic of Ghana with the status of a Court of Appeal Judge. She currently works as a legislative drafting consultant.

The highlight contributions of Estelle's career at the Ministry of Justice and subsequently as a legislative drafting consultant, have included the preparation of social policy legislation that transcends cultural and civil law perspectives. Her keen interest has been the preparation of legislation that improves the quality of people's lives, advances their wellbeing and curbs inequality. To that end, Estelle has been proudly concerned with legislation on children, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, affirmative action, mental health, aged persons and social protection amongst others. As Estelle recounts,

It has been rewarding to be involved with crafting these laws. I have published on diverse subjects that include mental health legislation, the property rights of spouses, legislation on Anti-Corruption Initiatives in Ghana, terrorism, the proliferation of small arms, social protection, affirmative action, Climate change and West Indian Patriots in West Africa. Training and sharing knowledge in legislative drafting has been my strength. My ultimate object has been to draft legislation that is clear, concise and easily understood in furtherance of the Rule of Law.

ESSI MATILDA FORSTER: A LEGACY

Essi's legacy as the first woman lawyer in Ghana lives on. First, as a trailblazer and the first woman to be employed in Ghana as a corporate lawyer.

Secondly, Essi was a wonderful mentor to her daughter Estelle Appiah and many others in her fight for women's rights and her public service.

Thirdly, she was an inspiration, because she inspired women lawyers beyond Ghana. This was on a visit to her daughter Estelle in Lesotho, Southern Africa. At that time there were only six women lawyers in Lesotho. Five years later, there were twenty five. Estelle is convinced that her mother Essi Matilda Forster was an inspiration to the women she met during that visit.



INSTITUTE FOR AFRICAN WOMEN IN LAW **(IAWL)**

The Institute for African Women in Law is a non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to supporting the formidable works of women in law across the continent of Africa and the Diaspora. Our mission is to be a focal point for addressing issues across the legal and judicial professions.

Visit our website at: **www.africanwomeninlaw.com**

Email us at:

info@africanwomeninlaw.com

Follow us on:

Facebook | Institute for African Women in Law

LinkedIn | IAWL ~ Institute for African Women in Law

Instagram | @AfricanWomenInLaw

Twitter | @AfricaWomenLaw

Copyright © 2022

Institute for African Women in Law

All Rights Reserved