

# My Alma Mater: The Bermuda Technical Institute

**Khalid Abdul Wasi**

## Introduction

This article reflects my personal experience as a student attending the Bermuda Technical Institute (BTI) from 1964 to 1968 and shows, ultimately, how the school was beneficial to society in the way it shaped the careers of persons like me. The information in this narrative is not only my experience but is inclusive of conversations with Bermuda Technical Institute Alumni, direct conversations with MCP Albert Nicholl's family, and some research that was extracted about Nicholl in *The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily* (1941, June 2). It also includes what I learned about BTIs formation and unfortunate demise. Most of the information consists of personal recollections. Not all references are supported.

The history of Bermuda Technical Institute (BTI) has raised debates on radio talk shows, barbershop conversations and, at times, discussed vigorously across the floor of parliament to either dramatise proof of racism and former political postures or, more positively, as indicators for what needs to be done with our educational system. The article also highlights the BTIs purpose in maintaining the technology and apparatus that sustained the island for many years by training Bermudian technicians.

## Personal Experiences

I was in standard five at the end of the 1963 school year, a transitional year in education. Prior to this year, there were six standards for primary education before enrolling in high school. So for my elementary school graduation year, both the fifth and the sixth standard students were entering high school at the same time. I chose the high school I wished to attend.

I made a significant choice after satisfying questions that were important to me: Which school won the inter-school sports (track and field)? The answer was Bermuda Technical Institute. Equally important was who won the football competition. The answer was Bermuda Technical Institute (BTI). I didn't really know much more about the BTI prior, except that one of my brothers had attended the school. I do recall him playing with his school team in a night soccer match against the bus drivers. However, the fact that he went to England and became an optical technician I could not appreciate until after I had finished school, but the football stood out. Nevertheless after gaining answers to the above questions, I was determined to go to the Bermuda Technical Institute.

Transitioning from elementary school to the BTI was, upon reflection, good because the students that came before me had an order and respect for discipline that had become ingrained and was part of the culture by the time I attended. Aside from sports, many students had a keenness and aptitude to learn.

However, the huge experiential adjustment was with the teachers, who were not the motherly or nurturing type as I had experienced in elementary school. At the Ord Road School where there was one male, the headmaster and the chief disciplinarian, all the teachers were female. In contrast, at the BTI, starting from the principal, there were mostly male teachers and two female teachers. Between these two schools, there was quite a personality contrast in teachers, from the quiet disciplinary type who said, "I hear noise" and expected compliance, to the fiery disposition of teachers who demanded silence. Each of the teachers held their own reputation as disciplinarians.

The BTI teachers enforced their discipline and set examples. The school complied and functioned in some ways similar to a military academy as a highly disciplined institution of learning. At times, when you walked the corridors,

you only heard the teachers' voices or the noise of the students' pens scratching on the papers. We often hear our BTI alums talk admirably about 'Tech' as a school that was disciplined. Truthfully, the term disciplined is a euphemism to colour the reality that enforced that discipline, which is too often disregarded or not adequately told.

Rigid discipline was the nature of teaching in British institutions. It was done, not so much to intimidate or out of hatred, but it was a culture of English and European teaching that aside from demanding excellence, held an extremely authoritative role for teachers over pupils. The methods used although harsh, in hindsight, if you survived, created toughness and a military attitude of preparedness towards a task.

Given the dangerous industrial equipment we used at the BTI, along with the fact that there were no injuries, is a positive testimony to the rigid discipline in the workplace practiced at school. They were not overly generous with their marking system either. Students worked very hard to attain a C and, if you managed to get a C+, B, or A, you truly earned it. I recall starting in the first form with two classes combined totaling 44 students, but that number dwindled to only 27 five years later in the graduating year.

The teaching methods and subject matter were formative and in many ways holistic and, to me, somewhat reminiscent of the teachings of the renaissance era when privileged young boys were placed with masters to be trained. Imagine an 11-year-old being taught technical drawing. By the time they got to 13, they could do a cross-section through an engine and put it in a three-dimensional drawing. Imagine learning from that young age how metal is made from melting rock and extracting from its ore red-hot flowing fluids of metal that is cooled and shaped. Also conceive getting on a lathe and making your own bolts and nuts and your own tools by the age of 14. Then imagine being taught math and physics at a commensurate level with the technology and technical training.

It was important to understand that this training caused the students in an experiential way to think about what they were doing. It was not an exercise of memorisation. The BTI was not producing parrots. It was creating young men who were trained to dissect and think with a comprehensive understanding of technology and science, a characteristic that followed them through life.

Students made a coat hanger out of a piece of wire and items like a metal spoon by cutting a piece from a plain sheet of metal and beating it into form for their first piece of work. The BTI captured the essence of technology to transform natural raw material into something useful.

The school created technicians using the perfect hand, body, and mind combination. After graduating from the technical institute, the students left with an ability to turn their chosen craft into an art form. They were not tradesmen when they left school, but had the prerequisite to becoming master trades persons within a relatively short time thereafter. For example, at the age of 18, I was able to do the layouts for the Melborne Building in Hamilton, setting out the stairs, walls, and lintels unsupervised. Not surprisingly, I became a full general contractor with a crew of a dozen tradesmen by the age of 23, building houses and, at the age of 28, a four-storey building in the City of Hamilton.

The idea of producing competent technical students did not begin in 1956 with the BTI School. There were attempts to address the need to provide technical training as far back as the early part of the 20th century. At the Central School, Mr. Victor Scott, an early pioneer, opened a facility at the Central School in the early 1930s that taught boys carpentry. A decade later in 1941, one of his former students expanded that effort to the West End Primary School where, under a tin roof, they taught many young boys. Over 1000 young black students went through the manual training programme between both school sites (*The Royal Gazette*, 1941, June 2).

## Formation of the Bermuda Technical Institute

The intellectual divide considered manual or technical education as inferior. That notion was challenged with the thought that combining manual with academic actually increased the overall capacity and even worth of an individual. There is plenty of evidence for this when considering the inventiveness and creativity of many of

the renowned genius in global histories like Leonardo daVinci and others who were essentially trades persons or artisans.

In 1941 there was also the historic placing of the cornerstone of the Nicholl Institute, for what was billed then as a new phase in education for Bermuda. MCP Albert Nicholls donated 10,000 pounds to its creation (*The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily*, 1941, June 2, p. 3). There were several speakers at this event, which was by all accounts an auspicious occasion attended by many parliamentarians and members of the board of education. MCP Nicholls, among others, was one of the principal speakers at the occasion. His speech laid out the aims of the manual training school. In his speech, he also recognised the wholeness of manual and technical training for young boys and spoke of the purpose of producing people capable of running businesses and becoming merchants. He likewise mentioned that there were enough rich persons on the island and that the development of the much needed manual or technical education school in Bermuda need not be dependent as a government venture (*The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily*, 1941, June 2, p. 3).

The rationale for the creation of a more upscale manual training school like the Nicholl Institute is underpinned by pre-WW2 along with technological development. Sadly, given the Nicholl Institute was an all-white school, its overall effectiveness in addressing the island-wide demands was limited. The only other trade school, aside from the Dockyard for manual training, was the ill-equipped facility at Central School which only addressed primary school children.

Segregation at the time was an obstacle to creating an adequately funded technical training center without duplication that could produce enough budding technicians to satisfy Bermuda's growing market. The deficit in Bermuda for adequately trained Bermudian technicians caused a demand for a pragmatic solution to create a fully integrated school many years before segregation within the general society had ended. This underscored why the Bermuda Technical Institute (BTI) was both considered and needed. The school was formed over a decade or so after the Nicholl Institute in September of 1956 as the first fully integrated school with 57 students. Three months later in January 1957 another 55 students enrolled in the school. They were the first year and founding students of BTI .

The significance and the challenge of opening an integrated school in segregated Bermuda must be underscored. Bermuda had two unions each representing the separate races. The Bermuda Union of Teachers (BUT) which represented the black teachers formed around 1919 and was the first union to be established in Bermuda. The BUT became officially registered in 1947, as explained to me by Mr. Colin Benbow, one of its founders. In spite of a recommendation by one white teacher to join the BUT, the Teachers Association of Bermuda (TAB) was formed and registered a year later in 1948 as a union that represented the white teachers.

It is important to note that, in spite of their separation, both unions began to cooperate in the latter 1950's under the umbrella of the Joint Union Salaries Committee (JUSC) which is evidence that teachers were trying to bridge the gap prior to the formal end of segregation.

Both unions came together under what was known as the ABUT or Amalgamated Union of Teachers in the 1960's. It is important to note that the BTI would be a school with a mixed faculty congenially working together as early as 1956.

There have been no surveys to illustrate how the students fared as an integration experience. I could only relay information based on my own observation. It would appear that the racial attitudes between the students mirrored the society and, for the most part, the relationship between the black and white students was amicable. Those attitudes and behaviours were better in the school's earlier years and only eroded slightly towards the end as the issue of black power and political movements began to affect all the island's student populations.

Part of the unused funds left over from MCP Nicholl's generosity provided some of the seed money for the Bermuda Technical Institute. In his speech at the laying of the cornerstone of the Nicholl Institute, he lamented the fact that

the Nicholl Institute was going to be used only for white students and made a commitment in that same speech that he would assist the ‘colored’ children later on (*The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily*, 1941, June 2, p. 3).

The land in the Prospect area was approved by the government for the creation of the school and, in 1956, the school was opened to its first students. Unlike its predecessor, the Nicholl Institute, the school opened without fanfare: no speeches by parliamentarians or auspicious dignitaries. There was scarcely a whimper of recognition. Notwithstanding, within a very short period, what was missed in celebration, was compensated by performance. The school and students began to galvanise around an identity, which saw them excel in every area. This fact was affirmed in conversations with many of the founding Alumni and in my own experiences at Bermuda Technical Institute (BTI).

Industry persons were very much behind the development of the BTI; one only need to look at the composition of the board of directors and see that it consisted of the captains of the various fields of industry.

- Mr. Vincent Lee a black architect whose name would be behind many of the designs of some major sports clubs
- Sir David Gibbons owner of a car dealership
- Sir John Plowman also owner of an automobile dealership and garage
- Sir Richard Gorham owner of a lumberyard and major carpenter shop
- Mr. John Burland who owned the island’s largest construction company and adjoining carpenter shop (*The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily*, 1941, June 2, p. 3)

Their vision would not have been realised without the principal and faculty of teachers who contributed to the school’s success. Mr. Edward Crawford became the principal in January 1957 after Mr. Dernly who opened the school in September 1956 completed a three-month period. Mr. Crawford is described by former students as a silent warrior for the school and deserves, in my opinion, a lot of credit for its success. He was a philosopher who understood the value and association between trade, craftsmanship, and the development of civilisation. He fully understood that intellectual development was tied to our technological growth and awareness. Therefore, he valued the teaching experience that was preparing young men to take up the challenge as aspiring tradesmen to unleash their innate genius through mastering the world of technology.

All of the teachers were indeed masters in their own fields and brought textbook information and living experience with the trades to the classrooms. BTI alumni would attest that the success of the Bermuda Technical Institute was due to the caliber of teachers.

The school was formidable in sports and football as well as satisfying the market with well-rounded apprentices in all the trades. Because the school promoted mathematics and science, it was also producing the intellectual capacity for higher management personnel in the various fields of technology, including engineers, architects, and accountants.

By the mid to latter 1970s, almost every division of Bermuda’s technical existence, whether it was the private sector like BELCO and TELCO, or the public sector for entities such as Works & Engineering or Marine & Ports, was led by a former BTI student. Although the school only lasted for 15 years, its influence spanned generations.

## The Demise of the Bermuda Technical Institute

The Bermuda Technical Institute (BTI) lived up to its purpose and produced workers, tradesmen and businessmen, many of whom became leading entrepreneurs. The closure of the BTI was controversial. Many persons believed it was racially motivated. Former Premier Sir David Gibbons in a speech given at a BTI reunion at the old Bermudiana Hotel said nothing to dispel the issue of race. In that speech, he said that he did not personally support the schools

closing and relegated the issue of the BTI closure at the political environment of the late 1960's when in 1968 it was decided to wind down any further enrollment.

There have been many theories as to why a visibly successful school was closed. There are those who would say the success of the school was its own demise because it was not welcomed by those who feared it was producing too many qualified black businessmen. Then there are those who say the Board of Education had no appreciation for technical education and lobbied for the transformation of the school. There is also the conflated opinion that Sir David chose not to fight for its continuance while having the power over the board and the government. Instead, he acted as a 'Pontius Pilot' by letting the board of governors of the BTI be dissolved and thereby handing the school over to the Board of Education knowing they would close the school. We may never know the truth but, at some point, we may be able to research all the available material to gain a clearer understanding of the facts surrounding its closing.

## Conclusion

Bermuda has suffered the loss of the Bermuda Technical Institute and its role in keeping an ample supply of local technicians to satisfy and keep pace with an ever-expanding world of technology. In a few decades Bermuda regressed in its technical deficit to what it experienced in the 1940s. We now are almost entirely dependent on foreign technicians. Our students are behind their contemporaries in Canada and the United Kingdom in their access to technical education.

Bermuda has a very sophisticated and diverse economy which depends on technology. While it may be unrealistic to expect the country to be fully self-sufficient, it is certainly possible at the very least to have many of its citizens engaged and even enhanced by the opportunities that technology demands. This, I believe, is what the Bermuda Technical Institute did for young men like me. It gave us the tools to comprehend and command the world of opportunities around us in fields that required technology and technicians.

The BTI is gone but the demand for the likeness of it within our current educational construct in order to keep Bermuda self-sustainable is visibly needed. It is up to this generation of business, government, and industry leaders to find the amalgam for this age of commerce and technology and determine how to move forward and address the need for training in all the technologies for the future.

The Bermuda Technical Institute (BTI) created confident men grounded in an education that was connected to experience and science. I always find comradery whenever I am confronted with a former tech student. This characteristic also exists in a working relationship with them because there will be a debate over processes and methodology on any assignment.

I was able to excel because of the foundation I received at the Bermuda Technical Institute. I can recall early in my career when I sought work from major construction companies. Their superintendents went to cabinets and handed over tacks of plans and told me to "Go for it." I also recall hardly ever seeing them again once they gave me the plans. In fact, on one occasion there was a sensitive decision, and I called the owner of this major construction company that night, and all he said was, "You can figure it out," and hung up. Such was the confidence that many industry persons had in many of the BTI students.

It was by no accident that many Bermuda Technical Institute students became captains of all the major institutions in Bermuda, and that same success would follow them wherever they worked in the world. That is history. Now we must examine where we are and look towards the future.

## References

Manual training centre corner-stone laid: 'Symbolic' ceremony marks new era in education.  
(1941, June 2). *The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily*, pp. 1, 3.