



Alexander Twilight: Exploring How Economics Shaped His Life

One thread of Alexander Twilight's story that has been largely overlooked is his role as a businessman. By examining his business dealings, we can more fully understand this multifaceted man.

By DARLENE YOUNG

In June 1846, J. F. Skinner penned a pleading letter to Erastus Fairbanks outlining the problems the Orleans County Grammar School in Brownington, Vermont, was experiencing with its principal. Skinner, a trustee, was appealing to one of the state's most prominent men, a future governor. The letter requested Fairbanks's assistance in finding a suitable replacement for Alexander Twilight, principal of the school, the first secondary school in the county.

Alexander Twilight has long been an enigmatic figure in Vermont history. His life, character, and achievements have at times been obscured through oversimplification and distorted by speculation. If we examine all that we know about Twilight, the school, and the time period in which he lived, a more nuanced story emerges of the man credited with being the first person of African descent to graduate from a US college and to serve in a state legislature.

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When Skinner sought advice from Fairbanks, he offered a picture of the tense situation that existed in Brownington. For starters, he outlined a number of conflicts leading to Twilight's alienation from school trustees and church members. The tensions ultimately led to Twilight's departure from the school and the community.

The school trustees had concerns about Twilight's management of the school. "There had been a dissatisfaction experienced by many of the friends of the school for the want of bye-laws and suitable regulations in the school particularly that the scholars were not required to attend meeting on the Sabbath," according to Skinner.¹

Discord was also felt at the Brownington Congregational Church, where Twilight served as minister at times. Skinner, an influential member of the church, related in his letter, "For some years past the school has been under the care of [the Reverend] A. L. Twilight, who in the former part of his time with this people also supplied the desk as minister, but a series of difficulties arose which have been continued for the last 10 or 15 years."² (The term "difficulties" appears frequently in the records of the Brownington church when describing conflict.) Although tensions had been building for years, matters came to a head between 1846 and 1847.

Researchers have examined issues related to Twilight's race.³ Previously, historians have explored Twilight's role as principal of the Orleans County Grammar School and the driving force behind the construction of an imposing stone school dormitory; and to a lesser extent, his role as minister of the Brownington Congregational Church. One thread of the Twilight story that has been largely overlooked, however, is his role as a businessman. By examining his business dealings, we can more fully understand this multifaceted man.

EARLY LIFE

Little is known of Twilight's early years. He was born on a farm in or near Corinth, Vermont, in 1795, one of six children of Ichabod and Mary Twilight. According to Twilight's early biographer, C. E. Ferrin, "[Ichabod] died when Alexander was a child and he was indentured to a farmer in his native town for the remainder of his minority."⁴

His racial background, however, is well documented. Ichabod Twilight was a man of color, according to several sources. Serving in the Revolutionary War, he is listed in military records as "yellow," a term often used for light-skinned biracial individuals.⁵ In an accounting of Revolutionary soldiers from Warner, New Hampshire, Ichabod is listed as "colored."⁶ In the 1800 federal census, Ichabod appears as the head of household in Corinth, and is listed, not as white, but under the

category "All other persons other than Indians not taxed."⁷ Unfortunately, Twilight's mother's racial background is unknown.⁸

The story of Twilight's formal education begins with his time at the Orange County Grammar School in Randolph, Vermont. Alexander entered the school at the age of twenty. The institution prepared its students for college and for careers in teaching. Its curriculum included Latin, Greek, grammar, geography, arithmetic, rhetoric, mathematics, logic, natural philosophy, astronomy, moral philosophy, and French. "With the small effects of clothing and books which he possessed, in his hand, he made his way on foot to Randolph academy then in [the] charge of Rev. Rufus Nutting... Here combining study with labor to procure funds, and much of the time absent from school without an instructor, he fitted for college."⁹

In 1821, at the age of twenty-six, Twilight entered Middlebury College, seventy miles from his home and on the other side of the Green Mountains. When he began his studies at Middlebury, the school consisted of two buildings, a handful of faculty members, and a student body of ninety-two.

Although today Middlebury proudly celebrates Twilight as the first African American college graduate, at the time of his admission the institution probably was unaware of his race.¹⁰ An article about Twilight's accomplishments in a Middlebury College newsletter from the 1930s makes no mention of his race.¹¹ A number of years after admitting Twilight, Middlebury refused admission to another African American man, citing a policy not to admit negroes.¹²

Twilight entered Middlebury as an upperclassman. "He was an excellent mathematician, thoroughly read in history, and not destitute of belle-lettres culture, his knowledge of the languages was less minute and critical than it otherwise would have been."¹³

While attending Middlebury, Twilight's financial resources were limited. He found it necessary to take time off from his studies to earn money to pay for his education, a common practice at the time. In 1823, he received funds from the Middlebury Charitable Society, an organization with the mission of educating men for the ministry.¹⁴

The education that Twilight and students like him received provided an opportunity for upward social mobility. He graduated from Middlebury in August 1823, part of a class of eighteen. At twenty-eight, Twilight was the oldest of the group. Eight members of the class, including Twilight, would be ordained as ministers; six would serve in the legal profession or government; one became a doctor; several members would teach during their professional lives; and two would enter the business world. Five graduates would be elected to legislative seats, as would Twilight.¹⁵

After completing his studies at Middlebury, Twilight did not find a stable position immediately. First, he moved to Peru, New York, where he was hired to teach. There he met his future wife, Mercy Ladd Merrill, who was white and ten years younger. They married in 1826. The couple returned to Vermont in 1828, when Twilight took a teaching position in Vergennes.

ORLEANS COUNTY GRAMMAR SCHOOL

A year later the Twilights relocated again, ending a somewhat nomadic period in their lives. The couple's destination in 1829 was Brownington, Vermont, in the northeast corner of the state, where settlement had commenced just three decades previously. Twilight relocated this time to assume the position of preceptor, or principal, at the Orleans County Grammar School, where he would make his most lasting impact. "He came . . . with five years' experience as a teacher with the intention of making it his life work. His ambition was to make [the school] one of the best academies in the state, and he entered upon the work with the zeal and energy of one who meant business."¹⁶ He also became acting pastor at the Brownington Congregational Church.

Twilight's first years in Brownington were marked by success. With a force of character that would define his life, he presided over a period of increased growth and enhanced reputation for the grammar school, the only secondary school in the county. In 1829 when he began at the school, population in the county was growing rapidly. The number of scholars, both male and female, increased. And he enjoyed the support of the community. "In the beginning of his work, he was well sustained by . . . influential men in the county."¹⁷

Twilight's personality endeared him to his students, who unfailingly sang his praises. He was particularly known for his ability to inspire young people. "Mr. Twilight was an excellent teacher . . . He secured not only the respect but also the sincere esteem of his pupils . . . In that old academy many young men were filled with lofty ambitions and stimulated to noble attainments, and in them he still lives a mighty and abiding power for good in the world."¹⁸

Students appreciated Twilight's sense of humor and playfulness. They remembered the fun and the occasions that brought laughter. "Who could ever forget him that went to school here. . . . That puffy, rotund form, the inevitable calico gown, the bronzed but mirth-provoking face, the jest-loving propensity, the perennial fun, sometimes breaking out in the midst of the school room, the abrupt contagious but quiet laugh . . . the old tin gun which he used to charge with hydrogen gas and fire at the 'boys,' being a part of his experiments with the apparatus; his endless humor with 'Mase' Kimball, whose bluff, hearty way he liked."¹⁹

One student recalled a school exhibition in which a classmate dressed up as Twilight and mimicked him in manner. "Dressed to imitate the master's portly form, with a leather strap in his hand, he 'heard' a recitation from a class or two... Mr. Twilight was much amused."²⁰

"One favorite pastime was to administer what he called 'laughing gas' [nitrous oxide], under the influence of which the boys would perform various peculiar and astonishing feats," according to an account by a former student.²¹ For one such experiment, Twilight urged his volunteer to exaggerate the effects of the gas as a joke. After the end of the experiment, when everyone was settled in for the night, the young man feigned an extreme reaction to the drug and ran off to hide in the academy attic, pursued by his classmates and Twilight.²² The joke was on Twilight.

He was particularly known for his effective discipline, both verbal and corporal. "His power of invective sarcasm, satire and ridicule were tremendous. No sensible rogue would wish to encounter it but once," according to one student.²³ Twilight's command over his students was near absolute. In one incident, as a student proceeded to the front of the room, a classmate pinned a handkerchief to the student's coat, causing widespread amusement. "Mr. Twilight, who had maintained an imperturbable silence through all the commotion, said with that impressive voice which had such power over the scholars, 'It is a fool that laughs at the folly of a fool.' Instantly the laughter ceased and what had seemed amusing became childish and contemptible."²⁴

Numerous students recalled the four-foot leather strap Twilight used "in the cultivation of obedience and reverence."²⁵ Another student recalled the same method of discipline and a prank played by fellow students: "It was among the boys, a favorite method of annoying the old gentleman, to secure and hide his strap and he was obliged to keep on hand one or two of these effective weapons in order to be ready for any emergency."²⁶

One student recalled "many amusing anecdotes... of Mr. Twilight's coming softly down the halls to see if each pupil was studying."²⁷ High-spiritedness was sometimes the order of the day. For instance, one student rolled a cannon ball down the dormitory hallway "to get up a frolic." Twilight responded to the uproar but was unable to locate the culprit.

EARLY TENSIONS

The business of boarding students is an important thread in the Twilight story and would become a source of tension within the community. In addition to serving students from Brownington, the school attracted young men and women from all over northern Vermont and Lower Canada (present-day Québec). The influx of dozens of boarding stu-



Shortly after coming to Brownington in 1829 to serve as the principal of the Orleans County Grammar School, Alexander Twilight built a two-story wood-frame dormitory. The building was in use by the fall of 1830. Courtesy of the Old Stone House Museum and Historic Village.

dents each term provided a financial boost to anyone offering the service. One enterprising resident added a story to his house in order to accommodate boarders and actively recruited female students to boost his business.²⁸ As enrollment increased, more local families benefitted from the school's success.

Twilight soon began construction of a school dormitory to supplement his income. By 1830 his two-story, wood-frame boarding house was ready for students. He and his wife made their home there as well. In September 1830, the school trustees advertised the advantages of the new facility: "A new boarding house near the Academy is in readiness, where every exertion will be used by the Preceptor for the moral and intellectual improvement of his pupils."²⁹ The couple welcomed as many as eleven students to board in the house.

The income of \$1.25 per week per student must have been a welcome addition to the Twilights' livelihood. Tuition, by contrast, was \$1.50 per quarter. Although information about salary levels for teachers and principals of the grammar school is limited, school records reveal that in 1844 Twilight received \$233 for the year, or about \$57 per term, in addition to tuition fees.³⁰ Four students paying \$1.25 per week for the term would total \$60.

Twilight's dormitory likely became a source of tension between him and families who also hoped to profit from boarding fees. The onset of "difficulties" in town corresponds with his dormitory project. (In 1846 Skinner wrote that the difficulties had "continued for the last 10 or 15 years" which places the beginning of the tensions between 1831 and 1836, the period around the time the dormitory opened.) He was in direct competition with his neighbors for boarders.

No discussion of Twilight would be complete without mention of his "unconquerable will."³¹ He was at the center of several divisive incidents at the church during his first years in town. In 1831, he was part of a group of ministers who led revivals in Brownington and several other towns, part of a nationwide movement that came to be known as the Second Great Awakening. Revivals often didn't sit well with otherwise staid church congregations. Some mistrusted the fervor of revivals, which probably led to a later charge that Twilight was more aligned with the Methodists than with Congregationalists.³²

In the years that followed, tensions repeatedly surfaced. The congregation saw a series of accusations, excommunications, and ecclesiastical councils. In 1833 Twilight confronted Jasper Robinson privately with concerns over "unchristian conduct," a practice outlined in the church covenant. When Robinson dismissed the concerns, Twilight lodged a formal and public complaint against the prominent merchant, judge, and charter member of the church.³³



Twilight served as pastor of the Brownington Congregational Church during three different periods, from 1829-1834, 1846-1847, 1852-1853. The church building was completed in 1841. Courtesy of the Old Stone House Museum and Historic Village.

In September 1833 church leaders called an ecclesiastical council, comprised of ministers and laymen from area churches, in an effort to settle the dispute. Church records allude to “difficulties” that had existed since the beginning of Twilight’s service. Robinson let it be known he would make his own complaint against Twilight in self-defense, but the church disallowed it because it didn’t follow established rules. Although church records allude to thirteen charges made by a member against Twilight, most were never listed. “Unsoundness of faith” and “agreement with the Methodists in points of doctrine” were the charges that were specified.³⁴ The ecclesiastical council supported Twilight, but also provided guidance for the strong-willed minister.

“Respecting the case of Mr. Twilight the council are unanimously of the opinion that the charge brought against him respecting his unsoundness in the faith, is entirely without foundation[.] [T]hey are at the same time of opinion that owing to the state of Society and the multiplicity of his engagement, the peculiar doctrines of the Gospel may not have been exhibited with sufficient prominence in his sermon and that upon some occasions he may not have been sufficiently guarded in his expressions. The council would therefore recommend to him to pay more attention to these points in the course of his future labours.”³⁵

Twilight was also criticized for his interactions with the Reverend Otis Curtis, a minister with whom he led the revival, although the records are unclear about what had transpired. The council found no ill intentions on Twilight’s part and took a generally conciliatory tone. It condemned the motivation behind the charges against Twilight as “directly contrary to the spirit of the Gospel.”³⁶

The year after the ecclesiastical council met, in 1834, Twilight left his role as minister, though he would remain a member of the church.

A NEW DORMITORY

Twilight’s strong will was as evident at the school as it was with the church. During the early 1830s, he began planning a grander dormitory, an enterprise that would once again challenge the status quo. “The wants of the school soon outgrew [the first dormitory] and he began to urge upon the trustees the importance of having a boarding house of large dimensions.”³⁷

In thinking about a larger dormitory for the school, Twilight may have called upon his memories of Middlebury and its three-story limestone structure built in 1810, now known as Painter Hall. Twilight attended classes in the building and boarded there in his last year. He pursued plans for a four-story granite dormitory large enough to house dozens of students.

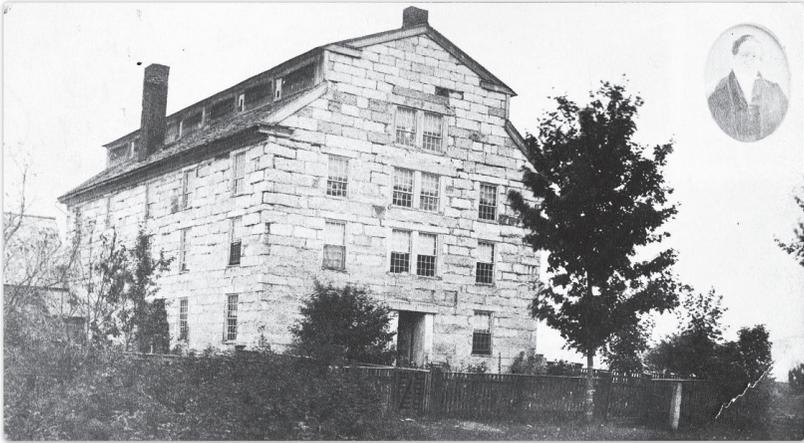
The board of trustees apparently did not share Twilight's vision. The issue of a large-scale dormitory caused tensions that reverberated throughout the community. "The discussion of this question, and other matters relating to the school and church went so far as to become acrimonious and the oneness of feeling . . . was destroyed for the time, and some became alienated from Twilight."³⁸ After delays, the trustees eventually decided not to involve themselves in the dormitory project.

Without the backing of the trustees, Twilight was faced with a choice. He could abandon the project or find other means to finance it. One option was for him to assume the risk himself. If the venture succeeded, he'd have much to gain; the problem, however, was that the venture also posed enormous financial risk. Eventually, he elected to raise funds through subscription and borrowing while also investing in the project himself. "Getting what he could by voluntary subscriptions, part of which the subscribers had the promise would be returned to them, he commenced the erection of what has been known as the old 'stone boarding house.'"³⁹

Twilight was not without allies in the community and his alliances served him well financially. Although the board of trustees did not officially endorse the project, some members found a way to discreetly support Twilight in the endeavor. In January 1834 six members of the grammar school board met to act on a single agenda item. "When it was voted that the Treasurer of Said Corporation be authorized to loan Certain Individuals in Brownington a Sum not exceeding five hundred dollars for term not exceeding four years with interest annually in such sums and such times as the friends of the Said corporation will permit for which monies the Said Treasurer is directed to take good and sufficient security."⁴⁰ School records do not name the loan recipients, but the timing and secrecy surrounding the transaction suggest that Twilight was one of the "Individuals." The next meeting recorded is three years later, in January 1837.

In another instance of support for Twilight in the community, Portus and Carlos Baxter gave property to him. The Baxters deeded an acre of land to him for the dormitory. (Portus Baxter served as a school trustee and as president.) The gift carried two stipulations: that a good board fence be maintained and that the property be used solely for the grammar school.⁴¹

For a construction project on the scale Twilight planned, the written record is sketchy. No drawings or budget are known to exist for the four-story dormitory. No detailed accounts of how construction proceeded have surfaced. Between 1833 and 1844, during the peak of student enrollment and the construction of the stone boardinghouse, school records



Twilight oversaw construction of the four-story granite dormitory that housed students of the Orleans County Grammar School. He financed the structure without the official support of the board of trustees. The building was completed circa 1836. Courtesy of the Old Stone House Museum and Historic Village.

show only four trustee meetings, a curious silence during a watershed period. Did the community turn its back on the project and Twilight because of the “difficulties”?

Twilight’s stubborn independence has long been recognized—even praised. While it engendered loyalty in some, it alienated others. “[F]or some years he was left alone by the trustees to run the school as he saw fit.”⁴² The school’s early historian summarized the situation: “With that unconquerable will and energy that were his characteristics he determined to enter upon the work of building a house himself.”⁴³ The account may be the source of the often repeated but inaccurate assertion that Twilight built the stone dormitory by himself.

Twilight began to use the building for boarding students as soon as feasible, perhaps compelled by the need for income from it. In keeping with the times and loftiness of his vision, Twilight christened the building Athenian Hall. For others the building was simply known as the stone boardinghouse or the stone house.

SCHOOL FUNDING

Twilight’s financial situation, like that of the grammar school, was far from secure. He led the school during a time in which the educational landscape was changing. At issue was a proposed division of public monies designated for the support of county grammar schools. The Vermont constitution of 1777 outlined a model for educating the state’s

young people. "A school or schools shall be established in each town . . . One grammar school in each county, and one university in this State, ought to be established by direction of the General Assembly."⁷⁴⁴

Town charters, authorized by the General Assembly, provided for the support of several educational institutions by reserving a right of land in most towns to be held publically with the rent going for the support of each school.⁴⁵ In 1829, the year Twilight arrived in Brownington, the land rent from the public lands to support Orleans County's grammar school was considerable. The rent totaled \$400 a year, all of which supported the Orleans County Grammar School, the only grammar school in the county.

The same year, Craftsbury Academy at the southern end of the county was incorporated and it opened its doors three years later. The threat to the grammar school, and by extension Twilight, of a competing school or schools was three-fold. Not only would the division of public funds reduce the income of the Brownington school; enrollment was likely to decline as well. The mere existence of a second school meant fewer students for the grammar school. In addition, a competing school would very likely mean fewer students paying boarding fees.

Anticipating that the issue of dividing the public educational money would come before the legislature in 1836, Twilight ran for the Vermont House of Representatives. In September, Brownington voters elected him to represent the town that year. On October 13, 1836, Twilight was sworn in as a member of the house. (Many years later he would be recognized as the first African American legislator in the country.) Two days later the bill dividing the grammar school lands was introduced.

His effort in the legislature was an attempt to protect the interests of the Orleans County Grammar School as well as his own. "[Twilight] foresaw . . . that if one division was made the way would be easier for another and so in a short time the fund would be spread out so thin it would help nobody, and the cause of education would suffer accordingly."⁷⁴⁶

Later that fall the General Assembly considered the petition to divide the public funds designated for the county grammar school between the Orleans County Grammar School and Craftsbury Academy. When the bill came up for final consideration on November 14, Twilight spoke against it and offered a motion to dismiss the bill. The house soundly defeated his motion, 141 to 29.⁴⁷ Division of the grammar school funds continued during the succeeding decades as more secondary schools opened around the county.⁴⁸

ECONOMIC CRISIS

On the heels of his legislative defeat, an economic crisis loomed. When Twilight had begun construction of the stone dormitory, agriculture was flourishing, with wool production as its mainstay.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the population in Orleans County was expanding, having doubled between 1820 and 1830.⁵⁰

But by the time the dormitory neared completion the economy was shaky and on the verge of collapse. The Panic of 1837 caused real estate values to fall sharply and commodity prices such as wool to plummet. Banks, industries, and businesses failed. Educational institutions also suffered. The University of Vermont, for example, was sued for debt. In addition, two Bennington schools closed.⁵¹ Between 1830 and 1840 the population of Orleans County decreased. If investing in the dormitory had seemed risky to some at the start of construction, by the end of the 1830s, the project could have appeared a truly foolhardy investment.

When Twilight needed cash, he turned for help to the community where he grew up. In June 1838 Twilight mortgaged both the two-story wood dormitory and the four-story stone dormitory for \$2,000. James S. Moore from Strafford in Orange County, Vermont, held the mortgage.⁵² The nature of the relationship between Twilight and Moore is unknown.

Twilight tried to use promotion to help him through the lean times. He appealed to the students of the grammar school and their families, all of whom were doubtlessly feeling the effects of the economic downturn. In September 1839, the first known advertisement touting the stone dormitory appeared. "Rooms are fitted up with accommodations for cooking, where the scholar may support himself nearly as cheap as at home. This method is strongly recommended."⁵³ Twenty-five students, both male and female, lived at Athenian Hall for that fall term. And the Twilights continued to board students across the road in the wood-frame dormitory. In the 1839 catalog, a sense of pride is evident: "The Boarding House is a splendid granite building, in which rooms are conveniently fitted for those who wish to board themselves."⁵⁴

DIFFICULTIES

During the late 1830s and 1840s a series of conflicts within both the church and school communities further undermined Twilight's standing in the community. In 1837, the church considered the "difficulties" between Twilight and Deacon Luke Spencer, but chose not to intervene. No formal charges were made against him. Rather, the church committee urged everyone to behave appropriately and refrain from "hard speeches and evil surmizing."⁵⁵ Three years later in 1840, a church committee was

unsuccessful in settling the “difficulties” between Twilight and N. S. Grow. Church records do not convey their nature.

Similar tensions were mounting between Twilight and the school trustees. During the 1840s Twilight’s contract with the school and a subsequent status report provide evidence of growing conflict. The documents suggest a principal accustomed to operating independently, who chafed under the edicts of the school trustees.

On August 2, 1844, Twilight and school trustees signed a detailed contract, the only one known to exist between the two parties. The agreement named him as principal for two years and outlined his compensation. The trustees agreed to pay him \$233 each year in addition to tuition fees. The contract also dictated a number of requirements for Twilight to meet. It stipulated that Twilight hire a “suitable” female teacher, as well as furnish fuel and chemicals for the institution. It further required him to advertise the school in newspapers.⁵⁶ Tellingly, all of the stipulations in the 1844 contract involved expenditure of funds. The sub-text of the document seems to be the trustees’ concern about Twilight’s ability to provide adequately for the institution.

The issue of bylaws became another divisive wedge. On the same day that Twilight and the trustees signed the contract, the grammar school board passed a resolution requiring the principal to introduce bylaws for the regulation of the school. The resolution required that the bylaws address “moral deportment and character.” It further stipulated that students attend daily religious services at the school and religious worship on Sunday.⁵⁷

Divisiveness at the grammar school spilled over into the church in 1845. Once again Twilight was at the center. “[On] one occasion . . . he attempted to establish separate meetings [for worship] at his boarding house and draw off the young people attending school from the regular worship in the sanctuary on the Sabbath, even after the church by vote gave him a cordial invitation to occupy the desk when ever he wished to preach for the benefit or gratification of the school.”⁵⁸

In the fall of the same year, the church experienced more “difficulties” that could be traced back to Twilight. On September 17, 1845, the church held an ecclesiastical council to consider whether to release the Reverend Vernon Wolcott from his duties as minister. The council found that the church had failed to adequately support Wolcott financially and so agreed to release him. Council members further declared it the solemn duty of each member to contribute to the church and lamented the deplorable state of the community.⁵⁹ Although Twilight was not named in the minutes of the council, later records would reveal his role in the matter.

At this juncture, Twilight began threatening to leave his position as principal of the grammar school. "He has repeatedly given us notice that he should not continue under the present state of things," according to the Skinner letter. Twilight suggested to the school's trustees that he might be willing to remain at the school if he could resume the position of minister at the church.⁶⁰ For Twilight, his position at the school may have been financially untenable without the additional income from ministerial duties. Despite the growing tensions, Twilight remained at the school.

During this contentious time, Twilight attempted to put his financial house in order. At the end of 1845, he approached the church with an unusual proposition. He offered to sell or rent the four-story dormitory to the church and pressed for a quick decision. The church, however, deemed it "inexpedient" to take action on Twilight's offer.⁶¹

Twilight continued to feel pressure from both the church and school communities. Within months of the ecclesiastical council, new developments occurred related to new school bylaws. At first Twilight objected to the trustees' insistence that students attend worship services, calling it bad policy. Later he argued that the requirement would be "an open violation of the constitution of Vermont,"⁶² although his rationale for the claim was unclear.

On February 2, 1846, a year and a half after Twilight and the school trustees signed their two-year contract, the board's prudential committee, consisting of E. G. Strong, William Joslyn, and J. F. Skinner, issued a report detailing what it saw as Twilight's offenses. According to the committee, he had failed to "procure a suitable female teacher to teach the ornamental branches, [and] the French language" for two terms.⁶³ The committee also faulted him for not complying with the resolution regarding the introduction of bylaws to regulate the school and the requirement of student attendance at religious services.

A brief hiatus in the tensions followed. The board took no action at their February meeting and adjourned until March 13, 1846. Twilight appeared to relent on the new bylaws; he composed and printed eight rules to govern the school.⁶⁴ When the board reconvened, Twilight presented the bylaws to the trustees for approval. Apparently satisfied, the board extended Twilight's term as principal beyond the end of the contract. Despite the appearance of compliance, the trustees would later realize Twilight had never implemented the bylaws.⁶⁵

Twilight proved to be less than forthright in his dealings with the church as well. Money was again the issue. On May 16, 1846, a group of church members met, with Twilight acting as moderator. He explained to the assembled why, after he had stepped down as minister and was

BYE-LAWS

FOR THE

ORLEANS CO. GRAMMAR SCHOOL.

FIRST.—The school shall be assembled, on each day of school, at nine o'clock A. M., and closed at 12 M.; re-assembled at half past one P. M., and closed at the discretion of the Teacher.

SECOND.—Wednesday afternoons, Composition and Declamation are required alternately of each gentleman of suitable age and character; and of each lady, Composition and the reading of a selection of her own Composition or from some other author—all exhibited before the School.

THIRD.—No scholar is allowed to interrupt or disturb another during the hours of study or repose, unless on business of absolute necessity, which is required to be closed as quick as practicable.

FOURTH.—Punctual attendance on all the requisitions of the school is enjoined as indispensable.

FIFTH.—All the members of this school are required to treat each other with due respect, and observe the strictest rules of modesty and decorum in all their intercourse with each other.

SIXTH.—The students of this institution are required to attend public worship on the Sabbath, at such place as the Principal usually attends, unless parents or guardians (or students of suitable age to select for themselves,) choose that the attendance be elsewhere.

SEVENTH.—The Principal himself, or by proxy, is required to conduct such religious exercises in this school, as is practised in kindred institutions.

EIGHTH.—These rules are to be enforced according to the discretion of the Principal.

BROWNINGTON AUGUST 14, 1846.

Printed at the Record Office, Irasburgh, Vt.

As requested by the trustees, Twilight wrote bylaws for the grammar school in 1846. He had the bylaws printed but never implemented them. Courtesy of the Old Stone House Museum and Historic Village.

merely a church member, he had withheld financial support from the church. The members in attendance acknowledged his uncompensated work for the church and absolved him of his obligation to support the church financially, as was required of all members. "In view of what Brother Twilight has done in ministerial labour & otherwise for this Church and Society without Compensation the Church voted in their opinion he has discharged his duty as a Christian minister in the Past time in respect to... supporting the Gospel in this place."⁶⁶

Although tensions at the church seemed to have abated, the same could not be said at the school. The uneasy truce between Twilight and the trustees had ended by June 3, 1846, when trustees took a series of actions. First, the trustees replaced President Portus Baxter, one of Twilight's long-standing supporters, with a new board leader. Next a veteran trustee was replaced. Finally the board enlarged the prudential committee from three to five members and charged it with recruiting a new principal for the school.⁶⁷ While Twilight remained at the school for another four terms, about fifteen months, he was essentially a lame duck.

The prudential committee quickly got down to work finding a new principal. On June 12, 1846, school trustee and church leader J. F. Skinner penned his remarkable letter soliciting advice from Erastus Fairbanks. "Knowing that your acquaintance with men of piety and science is extensive, we hope you will interest yourself in our behalf," Skinner wrote.⁶⁸ In addition to seeking counsel, Skinner related the events leading to the need for a new principal.

Meanwhile Twilight's relationship with the church community was deteriorating. At issue once again was his refusal to lend his financial support to the church while another minister led the congregation. The church constitution required all members to support the church through "sums of money or other property."⁶⁹

On June 6, 1846, several members of the church including Skinner, who had not been present at the previous meeting, lodged a protest. First they objected to the fact that no prior notice had been given regarding the matter of Twilight's financial support of the church. Furthermore, the group objected that Twilight had been released from his obligation to support the church financially, which set a dangerous precedent of not requiring financial support from all church members. Finally, they insisted their protest be included in the church record.⁷⁰

In his letter of June 12, 1846, Skinner made clear that he and two other members of both the church and the school's prudential committee did not support hiring Twilight as minister. Yet Twilight retained support within the community. "[A] portion of our church are desirous to have him preach," Skinner conceded.⁷¹

.....

The situation intensified a month later when on July 18 a church committee of three reported that it had been unsuccessful in settling the “difficulties” between Twilight and the church. As a result, the church called an ecclesiastical council to hear the charges against him. The council convened on July 29 and heard testimony from both the church committee and Twilight.

The council unanimously found Twilight guilty of the charge that he withheld financial support from the church. While it acknowledged he hadn’t received adequate compensation for his work, it concluded: “Withholding his aid has had a tendency to discourage others and his example has influenced to weaken the hands of those who wish to Sustain the gospel.”⁷² The council also found that Twilight had refused “to cooperate with the church by refusing to take any part in the Sabbath School and declining to take any part in prayer or religious conversation in Church and other Social meetings although often requested to do so.”⁷³

The council sustained the charge that Twilight “attempt[ed] to accomplish his designs by artfulness and cunning”⁷⁴ in trying to drive a church deacon from office. They expressed “their strong sens of disapprobation of a course of underhanded management and concealment.”⁷⁵ In addition, the council found that he had wrongfully accused the church members of false statements.

The council found evidence to sustain the charge that Twilight had tried to “supplant the gospel ministry in this place and greatly embarrass the operations of this Church.”⁷⁶ Twilight had attempted to keep students from attending church services by holding services in the dormitory.⁷⁷ Council members noted that he had actively worked to remove two pastors of the church, a position he once held and aspired to hold again. A level of animosity is evident from words attributed to Twilight. Asked whether he would support a different minister at the Brownington church, he replied that “he would not support even an Angel from Heaven as minister here.”⁷⁸

In closing, the council was conciliatory, urging all parties to learn from the past and come together. “[A]lthough we have found it necessary to censure some of his conduct we are aware that Bro. Twilight has been most ardently devoted to the interest of the literary institution in this place[,] that he has bestowed most arduous and self sacrificing labour for a long course of years to sustain and build this institution and on this account merit a respect and gratitude of this community[.] [P]erhaps a degree of forbearance and charity ought to be exercised towards Bro. Twilight owing to the peculiar circumstances in which he has been placed.”⁷⁹

On August 2, 1846, two weeks after the ecclesiastical council, Twilight issued a perfunctory, one-sentence confession to a meeting of the church. In it, he accepted the results of the council and asked for forgiveness. "I do . . . feel my self in duty bound for the peace and prosperity of our beloved Zion to abide by the decision of the Council and hope that forgiveness will be extended to me from all who may have been aggrieved."⁸⁰

A day later the church warned a meeting for August 12, to decide how to procure preaching for the coming year. No record of that meeting exists. But less than two weeks later, records reveal that the church had decided in Twilight's favor. On August 13 a committee presented Twilight with payment for his services for the ensuing year.⁸¹

LEAVING BROWNINGTON

In the early summer of 1847, after months of threatening to leave his position at the school, Twilight and the grammar school severed ties. After searching for a new principal for a year without success, the trustees advertised the summer term of 1847 without naming a principal.⁸²

Twilight, burdened with debt and alienated from many community members, looked for a way out. He decided to put the large granite dormitory up for sale. In August 1847 the school trustees adopted a resolution to purchase the building.⁸³

On September 21, 1847, Twilight signed a quitclaim deed for the stone boardinghouse, turning over ownership to the grammar school; he held the mortgage of \$3,000. The transaction included a stipulation that if Twilight "engage in any manner" in a rival school in Orleans County, the deal would be null and void.⁸⁴

With the dormitory and leadership of the school in the hands of others, Twilight was freed from the financial pressure and divisiveness of Brownington. Prohibited from working at any secondary school in the county, he and wife Mercy relocated to Canada. He served first as the principal of Richmond Academy in Shipton, Quebec, and then at the Charleston Seminary in Hatley.⁸⁵ Both schools offered elementary and classical studies, as well as language, arts, and music, a program similar to the one he had overseen at the Orleans County Grammar School.⁸⁶

After Twilight's departure from Brownington, the school eventually managed to recruit new leadership. By the time the school published its fall 1848 catalog, the trustees had engaged William Scales as principal. A graduate of Middlebury College, like Twilight, Scales earned a good reputation at both the school and the church, where he preached.⁸⁷

By the summer of 1851, however, the future of the grammar school looked uncertain. Many of the same problems that once worried Twi-

light now confronted the trustees. Enrollment was in decline due to competition from several other secondary schools in the county, resulting in a decrease in tuition fees. In addition, the grammar school rents were being divided among all the secondary schools in Orleans County.

Furthermore, room and board fees declined. By 1849, almost half of the school's eighty-four students were from Brownington, compared to a quarter just four years earlier. With fewer students coming from outside of town, the dormitory became less lucrative.

Debts mounted at the school. In 1851, a former trustee petitioned for damages for an unpaid debt. In order to satisfy the court's judgment, the school auctioned a large amount of its scientific apparatus and a small parcel of land.⁸⁸ The business of the trustees during this period revolved around efforts to remain solvent by such means as collecting payments that were in arrears. When Scales left his position as principal in 1851, the school owed him a portion of his salary.⁸⁹ During the summer of 1851, four trustees left the board, including Skinner, who had served as treasurer.⁹⁰

Members of the board of trustees disagreed about what action to take. On August 15, 1851, a trustee made the motion to "call" Twilight to return as principal. The motion failed, 7 to 1. A second vote was taken the following month, which failed by a similar margin. The school was unable to open for the fall term of 1851.⁹¹ For two additional terms the school remained closed while the trustees wrestled with the idea of rehiring Twilight. In December 1851, the trustees empowered one of its members to draft a contract with Twilight, perhaps hopeful that with his return the school could once again prosper. But a month later the trustees reconsidered and voted not to pursue the contract.⁹² Although he had been gone almost five years, the "difficulties" involving Twilight had apparently not been forgotten.

But gradually over the succeeding months, the trustees warmed to the idea of Twilight's return. A vote on January 29, 1852, to offer him a contract failed again, but was closer, 4 no to 3 yes. Finally in early summer a committee successfully negotiated with Twilight to return to Brownington as principal. (Oddly enough, it would take another nine months for the arrangements to be formally recorded in the school minutes.) Anticipating his return, the trustees approved the return of the stone boardinghouse to Twilight "on mortgage" on February 2, 1852. In the ensuing months, the board replaced its treasurer and two trustees.

And so in the summer of 1852, at the age of fifty-six, Twilight returned to Brownington. Townspeople, friends, and former pupils organized a reception at the stone dormitory in honor of the Twilights. The afternoon included a meal, singing, and prayer. The mood of the gather-

ing was cheerful and optimistic. “The merriment of supper was succeeded by Toasts, interspersed with several lively and appropriate glees. The toasts were given in honor of Rev. A. L. Twilight’s return to Brownington, of the present auspicious commencement of the Academical School.”⁹³ It was a hearty welcome for the couple, who had left Brownington surrounded by controversy.

After sharing recollections from his previous years in Brownington, Twilight expressed his appreciation for the friendly welcome. “This is the home of my choice and here with the blessing of God I will devote myself to the interests of education.”⁹⁴ Once again Twilight’s focus was on educating the young men and women of Orleans County.

In July a church committee secured Twilight’s services as minister.

The grammar school reopened quickly following Twilight’s return. In August 1852 advertisements appeared promoting the academic program and boardinghouse, with Twilight as principal. The ad related the circumstances under which Twilight had assumed the responsibility of running the school, explaining that he took possession of the dormitory along with its heavy debt. “He is determined to render it as interesting and useful to community as his curtailed means will allow.”⁹⁵ Given a public platform, he could not resist a dig at the trustees, “some of whom the principal highly esteems” but presumably not all.

On October 11, 1852, months after his return to town, school trustees formalized their agreement with Twilight in the form of a resolution, which passed. School minutes reveal that the trustees called on the community for financial support. The committee of three that had negotiated Twilight’s return promised him the money from tuition and land rents. Reminiscent of the 1844 contract, the resolution stipulated that Twilight provide fuel, be responsible for repairs and insurance, and hire an assistant teacher when the student population exceeded fifty. At the same meeting, the trustees excused from the board William Spencer, the deacon who Twilight in 1846 had tried to remove from office.⁹⁶

Despite the optimism in the community, Twilight was unable to boost enrollment or revenue. The grammar school welcomed just seventy-seven scholars for the fall term of 1853, down from a high of over 120 a decade earlier; only seventeen attended the summer term. By 1855 three schools in Orleans County shared the grammar school land rents—Craftsbury Academy, Derby Academy, and the Orleans County Grammar School—in addition to competing for scholars. The grammar school’s portion had been reduced to just \$150.⁹⁷

RECONCILIATION

In August 1853, Twilight reflected on conflict in a sermon based on the famous bible verse from Matthew 12:25: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand." His tone seemed to reflect some newfound understanding and an effort at reconciliation. Although he cited biblical and historical examples to illustrate his point, the congregation needed to look no further than Brownington.

It may be conjectured that I intend from these words to torture or chastise individuals, but I intend no such thing. . . . I intend by the grace of God to present the instruction which may be educed from the text plainly, candidly, and fearlessly and if any word or caution or reproof may be given, I hope it will be received with as much meekness and sincerity as it is given.

I know that men may differ greatly in their judgment, and contend so strongly as to neutralize each other's efforts and even overthrow the very object they intend to establish. So fixed and determined are they in their own way in the full belief that they are right and others wrong, that they will sink and be ruined in their social capacities rather than yield their opinions; and when they have been mutual in accomplishing this ruin, have the audacity to lay all the fault on the other.⁹⁸

Twilight led the school for three years after his return, but he was beginning to falter. Students recalled his diminished capacities in those later years. One former student painted a sympathetic portrait of Twilight at this stage of his life. "As I look back I can realize, what I did not then see, that Father Twilight was a hero, struggling manfully with ill health, hard labor, small reward and many discouragements. But he was faithful. He did his best intellectually and morally by all his pupils."⁹⁹

In October 1855 Twilight was stricken with paralysis. Ill and presumably without an income, he became preoccupied with money matters. On November 24 Twilight named Wilder C. Parker of Brownington his attorney to collect outstanding debts for him. Three weeks later, Twilight designated Parker to sell any of his property in Canada and to collect the money.¹⁰⁰ His shaky signature on the document shows evidence of his condition.

In 1856, the grammar school announced its spring term would commence despite Twilight's illness.¹⁰¹ The trustees named educational innovator Samuel Read Hall the new principal.¹⁰²

The financial challenges that had plagued Twilight throughout his life followed him to his grave. On June 19, 1857, after a protracted illness, Alexander Twilight died in Brownington at the age of sixty-one. The notices in area newspapers consisted of no more than a few sentences. Notably absent was an obituary detailing his life or paying tribute to his

accomplishments. Was the lack of an obituary due to the “difficulties”? Or was it simply a reflection of Mercy Twilight’s financial straits and an inability to pay the fee to have an obituary published in a local newspaper? A former student succinctly summarized the economics of the Twilights’ situation: “Mr. Twilight invested all he had and found himself at the end embarrassed by debt.”¹⁰³ He had made a huge personal wager in the stone dormitory at what proved to be a disastrous time.

In September, when the local association of ministers met in North Troy, the group passed a resolution in Twilight’s name and extended its collective sympathy to his widow.¹⁰⁴

The Orleans District Probate Court appointed three commissioners to “receive, examine and adjust” claims to Twilight’s estate.¹⁰⁵ In August 1857 the commissioners filed an inventory with the court that included a house that had an encumbrance, presumably the stone boardinghouse, along with its contents and one acre of land, valued at \$512.¹⁰⁶ The following February 1858, the court issued its final decree assigning the residue of the estate, real and personal property valued at \$334.79, to Mercy Twilight.¹⁰⁷ Twilight’s widow had the stone boardinghouse, but little else.

Fortunately for Mercy, there was an outpouring of support and sympathy from the community. Friends organized a “donation visit” for her a day after the judge signed the final decree. She expressed her gratitude for the headstone, and the donations of food, money, and firewood from the more than 200 people who attended.¹⁰⁸ Mercy was overwhelmed by the community’s generosity. Particularly touching for her was “the gentleman passing through town a few days previous to the visit who on hearing it spoke of, put a dollar in the hand of a friend to be presented [to Mercy]... saying he had been one of Mr. Twilight’s scholars.”¹⁰⁹

In the years following Twilight’s death, his students shared fond memories of him and their experiences at the school. Although he clashed often and at times vehemently with the adults in the community—frequently over money—the reminiscences of his students convey no tension or acrimony, only respect and affection.

As time passed, the memories of Twilight’s “difficulties” seemed to fade. Twilight became almost one-dimensional—a hero who had achieved the superhuman. The legend that he built the stone boardinghouse singlehandedly may stem from this simplified view. The threads of his life’s narrative lost their richness and complexity.

Although Twilight’s biracial background is well-documented, it is unclear how his race may have affected his standing in Brownington. At this point, historians cannot be certain whether he identified as an African American. His contemporaries in Brownington never referred to his race. By upsetting the financial status quo in town, was he unwittingly triggering a reaction from the White community? The question of how

his racial identity may or may not have shaped his life remains largely unanswered.

What has become clearer is that Twilight's business dealings influenced his relationships within the church and school communities. Early on, his association with both the school and church were positive, and both institutions benefitted from his leadership. Later, however, as he challenged the existing economic state of affairs, these connections frayed. When he became alienated from both church and school leaders in the late 1840s, he was left with little choice but to leave Brownington.

That we can see Twilight with more nuance puts us in a better position to appreciate his vision and tenacity. During his lifetime, Twilight made his strong presence felt in Brownington and Orleans County. Today we feel his presence through the imposing four-story granite dormitory that reminds us of his legacy, prompting both questions and awe.

The threads of his story—the leadership roles he played, his race, his strong-willed personality, and the economic challenges he faced—blend to form an intriguing picture of the man who holds the distinction of being the nation's first African American college graduate and state legislator. Twilight was a complex man—an educator, minister, businessman—who led and inspired his community, who challenged and sometimes upset the status quo, who educated and influenced countless young people during the nineteenth century. For all that, we celebrate him.

Vermont honors Twilight in several ways. The state placed an historical marker in Brownington, near the site of the school he headed. Middlebury College, his alma mater, named a building after him and the theater at Northern Vermont University-Lyndon campus also bears his name. In 2020 the state legislature designated September 23, his birthday, as Alexander Twilight Day. A posthumous portrait of him was installed in the Vermont State House in May 2022.

In 1859 Athenian Hall, the imposing four-story granite building

Life-size portrait of Alexander Lucius Twilight (1795-1857), the first US college graduate and first Vermont state representative of African descent (1836). Oil painting by Katie Runde, 2022. The painting is on display at the Vermont State House. Photo courtesy of the State Curator's office.



perched on a hill in Brownington, Twilight's ambitious and ill-fated business venture, a key feature in the complex Twilight narrative, closed its doors as a school dormitory. Today it is home to the Old Stone House Museum. The museum and surrounding village are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

NOTES

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