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*The Old Stone House is now a history museum.
It is also the home of the Orleans County Historical
Society.*

ALEXANDER TWILIGHT AND THE OLD STONE HOUSE

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For more than 150 years the Old Stone House has stood on a hilltop in the village of Brownington in the Northeast Kingdom. This huge building is now a museum. But it wasn't always. Its story tells us a lot about life in this small village 150 or so years ago and about the man who built it, Alexander Twilight

Alexander Twilight was born in Corinth, Vermont in 1795. His father, Icabod Twilight, was a freeborn African-American who had fought in the Revolutionary War. After the war he struggled to make a living as a farmer in Corinth. He and his wife, Mary, had five children. Alexander was the third.

When Alexander Twilight was a boy he was sent to live and work on a nearby farm. Many children of poor families "worked out" this way. When he had saved enough money he left the farm to go to school. Later he went to Middlebury College, where he studied to be a minister. He may have been the first African-



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Some desks from the Orleans County Grammar School, are now in the Old Stone House Museum.

American to graduate from an American college.

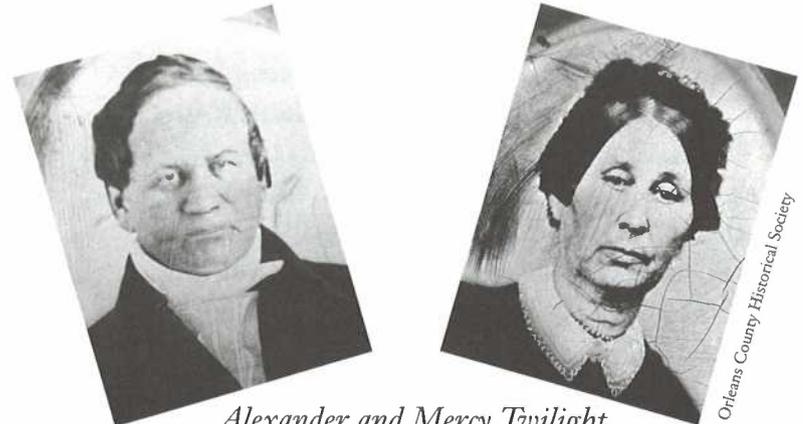
Twilight then taught school in Peru, New York, where he met and married Mercy Ladd Merrill. They moved back to Vermont and in 1829 he was hired as Headmaster of the Orleans County Grammar School in Brownington.¹

The local people called the school the Brownington Academy.

The school building had two front doors: one for girls, the other for boys. In the early days the second floor served as the village church. Soon after Alexander Twilight came to work at the school he was asked to be minister of the church as well.

Most of the Academy's students came from towns in Orleans County. Others came from as far away as Boston and Canada. Those who

¹ Headmaster is another name for the principal of a school. A 19th-century grammar school was about the same as a high school today.



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Alexander and Mercy Twilight

lived too far away to go home at night lived with families in Brownington. Some lived with the Twilights.

Alexander Twilight was a hard-working headmaster and a good teacher. More and more students came to the Academy. After several years Twilight decided that the school needed a dormitory, a building where students could live. He asked the trustees, who ran the school, to build it. They refused. Twilight then decided to build it, and pay for it, himself.

The dormitory was to be four stories high and made of granite. There was no building like it anywhere around. Twilight worked for at least two years to finish the huge building. He had help from friends and neighbors, but he did much of the work himself.

The granite blocks for the dormitory were quarried in fields nearby. An ox hauled the stones to the building site. We don't really

know how the blocks were put into place. Many people think that to get them to the higher floors the ox pulled them up a ramp that was built around the building. The story goes that one day, when the dormitory was almost finished, the ox got stuck at the top of the ramp. Since it could not, or would not, get down, Alexander Twilight had to have it killed. Then he invited the entire town to an ox-roast in honor of the new building.

Twilight called the dormitory Athenian Hall. It was named after the ancient Greek city of Athens, which had been a center of learning. Now it is known as the Old Stone House.

The dormitory opened in the fall of 1836. We don't know what it cost to stay there in the



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The kitchen of the Old Stone House as it looks today. It was probably not so neat when 40 to 50 students lived in the house.

early years, but in 1845 the cost was \$1.50 for a 12-week term. There were four terms a year. The money Alexander Twilight made from the dormitory helped pay back some of what he had spent to build it.

There were 30 rooms in the Old Stone House. On the first floor was a kitchen with a large fireplace and a root cellar for storing vegetables. Also on the first floor were five smaller rooms with small charcoal-burning fireplaces. Some of the rooms may have been dining rooms. Some may have been used by a cook or a teacher.

The second and third floors were where the students stayed. There were ten rooms on each. On the fourth floor were a parlor, two rooms for studying, and a large assembly hall.

The house was cold in the winter. Small fireplaces gave a little heat in most of the rooms on the second floor. On the third and fourth floors there were no fireplaces. Heat reached them through vents in the floors. The house's seven chimneys brought in more heat through the walls.

Between 40 and 50 students lived in the house. Boys and girls stayed in different rooms, but it is not clear if they stayed on different floors. Two or sometimes three students shared a room. They sometimes shared a bed too. The rooms were too small to hold much furniture, and sharing a bed helped keep the students

warm on winter nights. We know that at least one student brought a feather bed² from home. Feathers were warmer and softer than the straw that filled most of the mattresses.

Students could buy meals cooked in the dormitory kitchen. In 1853 this cost between \$1.25 and \$1.37 a term. Not everyone did this. Students who lived close enough to go home from time to time often brought food back to school with them. The barrel of crackers one boy brought was probably most of his food for the term.

The dormitory was not big enough to hold everyone. Families in the village continued to



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The home of Alexander and Mercy Twilight.

board students. So did the Twilights.

Alexander Twilight was popular with his

² A feather bed is actually a feather mattress.

students, but he did not always get on very well with the trustees. In 1847 he sold the dormitory to the school and moved to Canada to teach school there. The Academy did not do well without him. In 1852 he came back, but not for long. Three years after his return he was paralyzed by a stroke.

Alexander Twilight died in 1857. The Academy continued, but with fewer students. The dormitory closed. But the huge granite building remains. It reminds us of Alexander Twilight's strength and leadership.

Alexander and Mercy Twilight are buried in the Brownington Village Cemetery. Their gravestones face the Old Stone House. Perhaps they are still watching over it.

Rooting Around

What can you find out about education in your town in the 19th century? Are there any old schoolhouses still standing there? How are they used now?

The Village of Brownington is on the National Register of Historic Places. If you go there you can see the school building and Alexander Twilight's house as well as the Old Stone House.

The Old Stone House Museum is open from mid-May until mid-October. You can call for information all year at 802-754-2022.