

## Alton's First High School And Its Beginnings in the Unitarian Church

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The documents used in the preparation of this report came from historical records of the First Unitarian Church of Alton; from online searches in the [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com) database for articles about the school as printed in the Alton newspapers from 1854 through 1866; and from the Madison County ILGenWeb <https://madison.illinoisgenweb.org/>. The word Congregational and Unitarian refer to the same entity.

### Background

In 1831, Dr. William Samuel Emerson (2<sup>nd</sup> cousin to Ralph Waldo Emerson) arrived in Alton from Kennebunk, Maine to set up a medical practice. He and his wife Olive brought their Unitarian religion with them. By 1834 others in Alton joined them in practicing this liberal religion, and Sunday services were held in Dr. Emerson's office. On occasion, the Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, minister of the Unitarian church in St. Louis would come by steamboat to preach to those gathered. By 1836 the Alton Unitarian congregation was large enough to support its own minister, and by December 1836 had called the Rev. Charles A. Farley. He preached his first sermon on December 7, 1836, a date celebrated today as the founding of the Unitarian church in Alton.

In 1837 turmoil came to Alton with the arrival of abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy. Sides were drawn in the town, and churches of all ilk were divided in their loyalties. In addition, as a blow to the Unitarians, Dr. Emerson died in September 1837 at the age of 36. Two months later, in November 1837, Elijah Lovejoy was murdered by a mob opposed to his views, and Alton was marred with violence in the streets and social upheaval. Rev. Farley tried to remain neutral, but within a short time decided not to stay, and moved back to the east coast. The small Unitarian congregation grew even smaller as a result of the year's events and stopped holding regular public meetings, gathering instead in homes. On occasion, the Rev. Eliot would make a visit to preach and to provide ongoing support and encouragement. By the early 1850s, the Unitarians grew strong enough in numbers to again begin public worship, and formed the First Congregational [Unitarian] Society.

In October 1853, the First Congregational Society of Alton IL called the Rev. William D'Arcy Haley to be its minister. Soon the congregation was looking for property on which to build a church. In February 1854, the Catholic church located on the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> St. and Alby burned to the ground. ("Destructive Fire." *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 23 Feb. 1854: 2). The Catholics decided not to rebuild there and the two-lot property went up for sale. In October, an article published in the *Alton Evening Telegraph* reported the sale of the former Catholic property to the Unitarians. ("New Churches in Alton." *Alton Evening Telegraph*, 31 Oct. 1854: 3). However in the next issue of the paper a correction was made stating that the property was sold to Col. J.B. Stanford who then sold it to the Unitarians. [Col. Sandford was a member of the Unitarian congregation.] The correction was made, the article stated, so that friends of the priest "... would not take alarm at the sale, by a Catholic priest, of Catholic property, to a Protestant Denomination." ("Unitarian Church." *Alton Evening Telegraph*, 3 Nov. 1854: 3). Once the two lots were owned by the Unitarians, planning was immediately started for the construction of the church, and work continued through the spring and summer of 1855. The new church was dedicated in a grand style

on October 14, 1855. (“Dedication of the First Congregational Church.” *Alton Weekly Courier* 25 Oct. 1855: 1).



Unitarian Church, Alby & E. 3rd Streets, Alton  
Madison County ILGenWeb

The 1855 church building shown in this photo was demolished in 1904 and a new Unitarian church built on the same property on the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Alby Streets. The new church was dedicated in October, 1905 and is still the home of the present-day Unitarian congregation.

## **The High School Timeline**

### **1855**

In November 1855, the *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, reported that “... Rev. Haley [Unitarian minister] and others are preparing the way for the establishment of a Young Ladies School. Two women would be hired as teachers. (“A Young Ladies High School in Prospect.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 8 Nov. 1855: 1).

In early December there was an article in the newspaper announcing the December 10<sup>th</sup> opening of a high school (“A High School.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 6 Dec. 1855: 1) and on page 3 of that same issue was an advertisement for a “Classical and High School for Young Ladies,” listing the courses to be taught and the tuition and fees charged. The courses included English, History, Geography, Arithmetic, Algebra and Geometry, Chemistry, Natural Philosophy, Botany, Mental Philosophy, Rhetoric, Physiology, Latin, French, German, Drawing, and Music. The tuition for a 14 week term was \$7.00, with an addition \$5.00 for each language studied and \$10 for music. The teachers would be Miss Sarah Willard and Miss Charlotte Willard. Readers were directed to Rev. Haley for further information. In the advertisement it was noted that the winter term would be held “... in the brick building on State Street opposite Temperance Hall, formerly known as the State Street Hotel,” but that by Spring it was hoped that a larger and more convenient room could be found. It was noted that a few boys would be admitted, ages 12 and under.

## 1856

In the February 1856 issue of the local newspaper there was a job advertisement inviting carpenters to submit proposals to finish the basement of the **Unitarian church** for a school room. Plans were available to review at the Alton Bank building. (“To Carpenters.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 21 Feb., 1856: 3).

The Misses Willard listed their school again in March, advertising the March 24<sup>th</sup> start of the next 14 week term. There was no mention where that school would be located. (“The Second Term of Misses Willards’ School.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 20 Mar. 1856: 3).

There was an advertisement in the August 1856 issue of the *Alton Weekly Telegraph* announcing the Monday, September 8<sup>th</sup> start of the Fall Term of the **Misses Willard’s School**, to be held in the basement of the **Unitarian church**. (“Misses Willard’s School.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 28 Aug. 1856: 3) In the same issue (p. 2) there was a notice about a **Young Ladies Select School** under the direction of the Misses Willard which would begin on Monday, September 18<sup>th</sup>. The *Alton Weekly Telegraph* of September 4<sup>th</sup> had another ad (p. 3) for **Misses Willard’s School** which would begin on Monday, September 8<sup>th</sup> in the basement of the **Unitarian church**. The variation in stating dates I believe was a typo. In looking at a calendar for September 1856, the 8<sup>th</sup> was a Monday, the 18<sup>th</sup> was a Thursday.

By this point in the church’s timeline, Rev. Haley had resigned as minister and eventually moved back east. He served the Alton congregation from Oct. 1853 to October 1856. Rev. J.D. Forman followed him, serving from 1856 through 1861.

## 1857

The next reference to the school found in the Alton newspapers was on page two of the September 17<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, under the heading **High School for Girls**. It was stated that the school would be in the basement of the **First Congregational Church** and taught by Miss Frances Brown from Vermont, and Miss Abbie Tower from Alton. The curriculum would include all branches of an “English education,” including Latin, French, German, Drawing, and Painting. (“High School for Girls.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 17 Sept. 1857: 2).

The next mention of the school room in the **Unitarian church** was in a letter to the editor in December 1857. The letter makes it sound as though the **High School for Girls** is no longer in operation. The writer expounds on the need for a free high school in the Common School System, and states that the City provides free elementary schools and believes it should also provide a free high school. The letter continues with the comment that the Council indicates there is no money to build a school house. The writer suggests taxing the grog shops for funding to pay for a high school. The letter mentions the school room in the basement of the **Unitarian church** with the suggestion that that the school room would be “well adapted to this purpose.” [i.e., a high school]. The writer describes the room as “large, easily warmed in winter, and well ventilated in summer.” Purportedly it could be obtained for \$200 per year. It is also located in “... a central part of town ... the best and most pleasant location for a high school in the City.” The writer says the room was designed for a high school and that there is a large lot for a playground and the Courthouse

Square next to the school room would allow for additional exercise. It is strongly suggested in the letter that the City rent this school room. (“High School.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 3 Dec. 1857: 1).

## 1858

In June 1858 the City Council agreed to pay the **Unitarian society** \$125.00 to rent the basement school room. (“Proceedings of the City Council.” *Alton Daily Courier*, 25 June 1858: 2). This rental makes the Unitarian church the site of the first public high school in Alton.

On page one of the June 17<sup>th</sup> 1858 issue of the *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, three columns are devoted to the description of **The Advanced School**, which is described as being newly organized earlier in the year for the higher grades as part of the Alton City free school system, and housed in the basement of the **Unitarian church**. The school is co-ed. The Principal was Mr. James Newman and the Assistant, Miss M.E. Richmond. The article was written on the occasion of “examination day” at the end of the first term of the school. School Board members, family and friends of the students, as well as members of the community, and other teachers and students from elementary schools came to watch the high school students be examined on the various areas of their studies.

The article describes the school room as large and commodious and that it worked well as a temporary setting for the school and was the best that could be obtained at the time. The school is described as a “new and improved” addition to the free school system. Apparently some of the community saw this school as a “mere experiment of doubtful practicality” but many others had confidence in its success. The writer goes on to say that “... the examination proved the school to have accomplished the very thing expected ... a complete triumph.”

The weather was unfavorable on examination day, and the streets muddy, but the school room was described as neat and clean, decorated with wreaths and pencil drawings done by students.

The examinations covered science, math, and English. Original compositions were read aloud and students also demonstrated the art of giving speeches. The students sang songs for the audience and awards and prizes were given. In all, over the term, 91 students were reported to have attended the school. At the end of the program it was announced that another teacher, Miss E.D. Richmond would be added to the faculty. (“The Advanced School.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 17 June 1858: 1).

In the August 20<sup>th</sup> 1858 issue of the *Alton Daily Courier*, under the heading Public Schools, the article describes the **Alton Advanced School** as being organized during the present year, and that it is “designed to afford facilities for gaining a knowledge of the higher branches of an English education.” The branches pursued were listed as: Advanced Arithmetic, English Grammar, Reading, Defining, Penmanship, Geography, Ancient and Modern; History, Ancient and Modern; Book Keeping, Geometry, Trigonometry, Surveying, Astronomy, Philosophy, Chemistry, Botany, Elocution, Rhetoric, Physiology, Drawing, and Vocal Music.”

The announcement goes on to say that no pupils would be admitted until they had passed an examination in the “ordinary branches” of a common school education (i.e., elementary school). Those wishing to be admitted to the Alton **Advanced School** must register in the school room of

the **First Congregational Church**. Mr. James Newman is listed as the Principal with Miss M.E. Richmond and Miss E.D. Richmond as Assistants. ("Public Schools." *Alton Daily Courier*, 20 Aug., 1858: 2).

Two columns are devoted to describing the **Advanced City School Exhibition** held in November in the school room of the **Unitarian church** the previous Friday evening. This was a crowded and well attended community event. The students provided entertainment including songs by the Chorus, a series of "Tableaux" with students portraying characters from literature and historical events, topical speeches, and the reading of individual essays. ("Advanced City School Exhibition." *Alton Daily Courier*, 9 Nov. 1858: 3).

## 1859

At the April 21<sup>st</sup> City Council meeting it was reported that Alderman Atwood wished to rent City Hall (he would pay the gas bill) for the **Advanced School Exhibition** scheduled for the following week. Two Aldermen, Hart and Coppinger, objected, and permission was refused.

In addition, Alderman Coppinger offered a resolution that the **Advanced School** be discontinued at the end of the present term. The Mayor cast the deciding vote to postpone the discussion until the next meeting. Councilman Atwood commented that the movement to close the **Advanced School** struck at the entire [free] school system and that Alderman Coppinger wanted a different system of schools. ("City Council Meeting." *Alton Daily Telegraph*, 21 April 1859: 3).

However, something must have happened in the week following the report of the City Council meeting because in the *Alton Daily Courier* of, Friday, April 22, the reporter wrote that the **Advanced School Exhibition** that evening would be in City Hall. ("Advanced School Exhibition." *Alton Daily Courier*, 22 April 1859: 3).

In the next issue of the *Daily Alton Courier* there is a 3 column article entitled "The **Advanced School Exhibition**" in which the author not only described the Exhibition the previous Friday where more than 1000 attended [obviously in the City Hall, not in the school room], and also editorializes on the "effort now on foot" to discontinue the **Advanced School**.

The article describes the school as "large and flourishing" under the guidance of Mr. James Newman and the Misses Richmond. The Exhibition of the students' efforts included various musical numbers, original dialogues and essays, performances of short dramatic pieces, and speechmaking and orations.

After ending the description of the Exhibition, the writer goes on to discuss the possibility of the **Advanced School** being discontinued. He says, "Incredible as it may seem to intelligent, liberal minds ... it [the efforts to close the school] has been very nearly successful ... An action on the resolution to close the school was temporarily postponed at the last [City Council] meeting ... only by the vote of the Mayor ... The free school system has many enemies in our present Board [City Council] and we shall not be surprised if they succeed in accomplishing this great wrong, but if they do we warn them that their official days are numbered ... The immense audience of the leading citizens and heaviest tax payers, the most intelligent ladies and gentlemen of Alton ... is an indication of the weight of the verdict of condemnation which will be visited upon the City



Council if they now abolish this school ... We think the Advanced School is as necessary to the City Free School System as the Primary Schools. The Board of Councilmen may withdraw the support of the City from it ... but the people will keep it up until they can choose another City Council, who will have a juster appreciation of what is for the good of the public and a higher sense of their own duties and responsibilities.” (“The Advanced School Exhibition.” *Daily Alton Courier* 25 April 1859: 3).

In May there is mention that the City Council would meet that afternoon, and that the main question before the Council would be about the continuation of the **Advanced City School**. (“City Council.” *Alton Daily Courier*, 2 May 1859: 3).

In the May 16 issue of the *Courier* it is reported that the City Council would have its regular meeting that day, and the writer assumes that the question of continuing the **Advanced School** would come up again. “City Council” *Alton Daily Courier*, 16 May 1859: 3).

I found no further entries about the Advanced School in the remainder of 1859.

## 1860

Newspapers.com had no entries for any Alton newspapers in 1860.

## 1861

However, the **Advanced School** must have continued through 1860, because in August 1861 the list of teachers is given for the various public schools, including the **Advanced School**. The teachers there were Mr. Adams and Mrs. B. Newman. (“Public Schools.” *Alton Telegraph*, 23 August 1861: 3).

It was also reported in that issue that a motion would be made at the next City Council meeting to abolish the **Advanced School**. Again the motion must have failed.

## 1862

Members of the School Board visited the **Advanced School** in February along with teachers from other schools and the general public. Students gave an exhibition of their scholastic endeavors. The writer of the article called the “... singing, declamations, blackboard demonstrations, and class recitations ... flattering to the scholars and to the pride of our people in possessing such a school – exercises worthy of any college exhibition.” Mr. Adams and Mrs. B. Newman were lauded as the teachers. The article continues, “We have never seen the **High School** appear to such good advantage, and we are sure that if some of our citizens who oppose this school (from motives of economy, we presume) were present, their view would have experienced a change.” “Our Schools.” *Alton Telegraph*, 7 Feb. 1862: 1)

The City Council paid the **First Congregational Society** \$50.00 for the rent of the room for the **Advanced School**. (“Proceedings of the Common Council.” *Alton Telegraph*, 5 Sept. 1862: 3).

The Madison County Teacher’s Association began its 2-day meeting in the **Advanced School’s** room, later going to the Presbyterian Church for an evening lecture. (“The Madison County Teacher’s Association.” *Alton Telegraph*, 3 Oct. 1862: 3).

## 1863

There was no mention found of the **Advanced School** in any issues of the Alton newspapers in 1863. There was much coverage of the Civil War. Many Altonians supported the Union troops.

## 1864

The City schools were to open on Monday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1864, and the examination for students wanting to be accepted into the **Advanced School** was to be held on Thursday, September 1<sup>st</sup> in the **Advanced School** room at 9:00 a.m. (“School Notice.” *Alton Telegraph*, 2 Sept. 1864: 8).

## 1865

In 1865 the fall term for the City schools was to start on Monday, September 4<sup>th</sup>. The **Advanced School** teachers were Mr. H.C. Crowell and Mrs. Mary Emerson. The School Board Examining Committee was scheduled to meet on September 1<sup>st</sup> in the **Advanced School** room with the students wanting admission to the **Advanced School**. (“The City Schools.” *Alton Telegraph*, 1 Sept. 1865: 4).

## 1866

The second quarter of the 1865-1866 school year ended on Feb. 2 1866. Altonians were invited to attend the review exercises at the **Advanced School** on Friday, Feb. 2 at 2 p.m. (“School Notice.” *Alton Telegraph*, 2 Feb. 1866: 4).

In June, the Examining Board praised Mr. Crowell and Mrs. Emerson for their work with the students during the past term. It was reported that interest in the **Advanced School** had greatly increased. There were 66 students during the term, and the average attendance was 54. The Examining Board announced that at the June 26<sup>th</sup> student examination the “... scholars nobly sustained themselves on every branch of study on which they were examined.” (“Advanced School.” *Alton Telegraph*, 6 July 1866: 3).

Work began in May 1866 “... to erect the Lincoln School on Alton Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Streets – where Alton Schoolhouse No. 2 (elementary school) had been located. Lincoln School was officially opened February 4, 1867. The school building cost about \$40,000. Lincoln School was a three story building and had 12 classrooms. At the time of construction, it was considered one of the finest public schools in the state. The high school (i.e., **Advanced School**) students were moved from the basement of the **Unitarian church** to the third floor of this building.” (“Lincoln School.” [Madison.illinoisgenweb.org/schools/altonSchools/alton\\_schools.html](http://Madison.illinoisgenweb.org/schools/altonSchools/alton_schools.html)).

An exact date for that move was not found, but in a newspaper account from November 1866 the column heading is “From the High School” and the students are listed by classes - First, Second, Third, Fourth (i.e., Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors). Mr. Raymond is listed as the Principal. (“From the High School.” *Alton Telegraph*, 30 Nov. 1866: 3).