

## **A Unitarian Church Launches a Public High School**

When Americans moved west in the 1800s, religious groups played a prominent role in shaping the new communities. According to historian Charles H. Lyttle, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Unitarians showed particular interest in establishing tuition-free secular public schools in the new territories, and in cities like Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis, “the Unitarians were conspicuously active and influential.”<sup>1</sup>

How successfully did the Unitarians exercise this influence? Did they receive unqualified public support or encounter some opposition? The case of Alton, Illinois, brings to light some instructive details, thanks to the work of Mary E. Johnson, historian of that city’s First Unitarian Church. In May 2020 Johnson completed a chronology of the development of Alton’s public high school. The following condenses her findings.

### **The Congregation**

Alton’s Unitarian church was founded in 1836 by William Emerson, a physician and second cousin of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Alton is about fifteen miles from St. Louis, and in these early years Alton Unitarians were assisted by William Greenleaf Eliot, who had founded his own St. Louis congregation two years earlier. Eliot likely set a remarkable example—if they needed one—as a promoter of public education.



The first church erected by the Alton congregation, which housed the Young Ladies School and the Advanced School.

Photo: [firstuualton.org](http://firstuualton.org).

### **Beginnings as a Private “Young Ladies” School**

However, the first school planned by Alton Unitarians charged tuition and fees. The *Alton Weekly Telegraph* reported in late 1855 that Reverend William D’Arcy Haley of the Unitarian congregation and others were “preparing the way for the establishment of a Young Ladies School,” which opened on December 10 of that year, offering courses in 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,<sup>2</sup> with an additional \$5.00 for each language studied and \$10 for music.

The teachers would be Misses Sarah and Charlotte Willard. A few boys ages 12 and under would be admitted. Readers were directed to Rev. Haley for further information.

An advertisement 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. Another advertisement in the February 1856 *Weekly Telegraph* invited 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).

In the March 20 *Weekly Telegraph*, the Misses Willard advertised the March 24 start of the next 14-week term. An advertisement and a news notice in the August 1856 issue of the *Weekly Telegraph* announced the September 8 start of the fall term of the “Young Ladies Select School,” to be held in the basement of the Unitarian church. A similar ad appeared in the September 4 issue. In September of the following year, 1857, the teachers were Miss Frances Brown from Vermont and Miss Abbie Tower from Alton. The curriculum would include all branches of an “English education,”<sup>3</sup> including Latin, French, German, drawing, and painting.

### **Transition to a Tax-Supported Public High School**

And then the Young Ladies School folded, or so Mary Johnson infers from a letter to the editor of the *Weekly Telegraph* in December 1857. The unidentified writer, unhappy about the state of affairs, said a free high school should be added to the city’s Common School System, which offered free elementary schools. The writer suggested taxing the grog shops to pay for it and also suggested that the school room in the basement of the First Unitarian Church would be “well adapted to this purpose,” being “large, easily warmed in winter, and well ventilated in summer”—and, as we know, designed for a high school. Purportedly it could be obtained for \$200 per year. It was also located in “a central part of town . . . the best and most pleasant location for a high school in the City.” Moreover, a large lot suitable for a playground and the Courthouse Square next to the school room would allow for additional exercise. The writer strongly suggests that the City rent this school room.<sup>4</sup>

The writer was apparently influential, or representative of a large sector of public opinion, or both. In June 1858 the City Council agreed to pay the Unitarian society \$125.00 to rent the basement school room.<sup>5</sup> And so it was that Alton’s Unitarian church became the site of Alton’s first public high school, which was called The Advanced School.

On page 1 of the June 17 1858 issue of the *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, three columns are devoted to describing The Advanced School, noted to have been newly organized earlier in the year for the higher grades as part of the Alton free school system and housed in the basement of the Unitarian church. Where the Young Ladies School tolerated a few boys under twelve, the Advanced School was co-ed. The principal was Mr. James Newman and his assistant Miss M.E.

Richmond. The article describes “examination day” at the end of the first term. School Board members, family and friends of the students, members of the community, and other teachers and students from elementary schools came to watch the high school students be examined in various areas of their studies.

The article describes the school room as large and commodious and states 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 adds that “... the examination proved the school to have accomplished the very thing expected ... a complete triumph.”

On examination day the weather was unfavorable and the streets muddy, but the school room was described as neat and clean, decorated with wreaths and pencil drawings by students. The examinations covered science, math, and English. Students read their original compositions, demonstrated the art of giving speeches, and sang. Awards and prizes were given. Over the term, 91 students were reported to have attended. At the end of the program a new teacher, Miss E.D. Richmond, was introduced.<sup>6</sup>

An article in the August 20 1858 *Alton Daily Courier* describes the Alton Advanced School as “designed to afford facilities for gaining a knowledge of the higher branches of an English education.” The branches are 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.” There is a mandatory entrance examination in the “ordinary branches” of a common (i.e., elementary) school education. Those wishing to be admitted to the Alton Advanced School must register in the school room of the First Congregational Church, as the Unitarian church was then called. Mr. James Newman is again listed as the Principal and Miss M.E. Richmond as Assistant, with Miss E.D. Richmond added in that role.<sup>7</sup>

Two columns are devoted to describing the Advanced City School Exhibition held on November 5 1858 in the school room of the Unitarian church. The students at this well attended community event offered songs by the Chorus, a series of “Tableaux” portraying characters from literature and historical events, topical speeches, and the reading of individual essays.<sup>8</sup>

### **Opposition Rises and Retreats**

At the City Council meeting on April 21 1859 Alderman Atwood asked to rent City Hall (he would pay the gas bill) for the Advanced School Exhibition scheduled for the following week. Aldermen Hart and Coppinger objected, and permission was refused. Coppinger also offered a resolution to discontinue the Advanced School at the end of the present term. The Mayor cast the

deciding vote to postpone the discussion until the next meeting. Alderman Atwood commented that the movement to close the Advanced School struck at the entire free school system.<sup>9</sup>

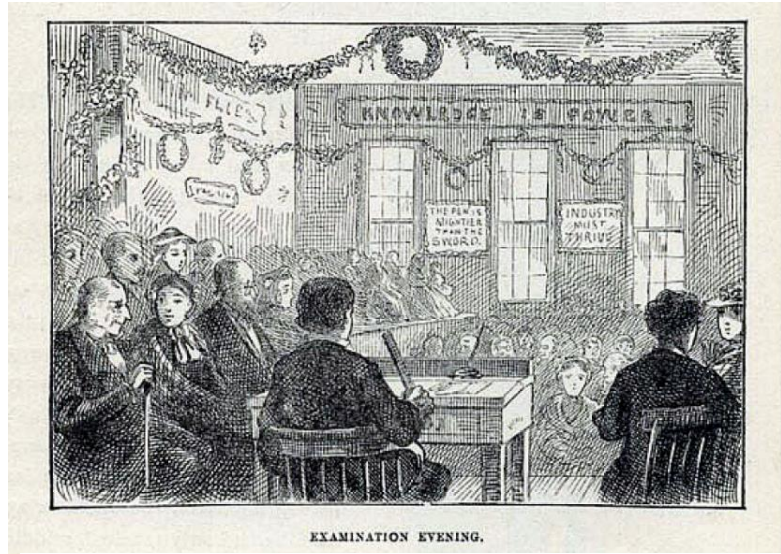
However, in the week following the report of the City Council meeting, the *Alton Daily Courier* of April 22 reported that the Advanced School Exhibition that evening would be in City Hall.<sup>10</sup> In the next issue, a three-column article mentioned an attendance of over 1000.

The article also editorialized on the “effort now on foot” to discontinue the Advanced School. It characterized the school as “large and flourishing” under the guidance of Mr.

James Newman and the Misses Richmond and then says this about the possible discontinuing of the school:

Incredible as it may seem to intelligent, liberal minds ... it [the effort 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.<sup>11</sup>

The May 2 *Daily Courier* mentions that the City Council will meet that afternoon to discuss the continuation of the Advanced City School. Discussion continued on May 16. Abolition of the school apparently remained a live agenda item through 1860, a year for which there are no records. Though there was a motion to abolish the school in August 1861, February 1862 saw



From *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* on [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org).

another exhibition by students attended by School Board members, teachers from other schools, and the general public. The writer of the *Telegraph* article calls 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 are 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)

Alton newspapers for 1863 make no mention of the Advanced School, while giving much coverage of the Civil War. Announcements of city school openings in September 1864 and September 1865 include the Advanced School. The second quarter of the 1865-1866 school year ended on Feb. 2 1866, when review exercises open to the public were held.

In June, the Examining Board praised the teachers, Mr. H.C. Crowell and Mrs. Mary Emerson, for their work with the students during the past term. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that interest in the Advanced School had greatly increased: 66 students during the term, with an average attendance of 54. The Examining Board announced that at the June 26 student examination the "... scholars nobly sustained themselves on every branch of study on which they were examined."<sup>12</sup>

### **The Advanced School Outgrows the Unitarian Church**

Since public support for the high school was strong—and the basement of the Unitarian church was probably getting crowded—the city of Alton in May 1866 began erecting a three-story, twelve-classroom structure at a cost of \$40,000 on a site previously occupied by an elementary school. The high school occupied the third floor of the new building, which—the Civil War being recently concluded—was named The Lincoln School.<sup>13</sup> Public secondary education now had a firm foothold in Alton, Illinois.

### **Concluding Observations**

The beginning of this piece mentions William Greenleaf Eliot of St. Louis. Reading through Mary E. Johnson's carefully detailed chronology brought to mind another Missourian, Mark Twain, and his *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, published in 1876 and set in antebellum Missouri. The plot includes public gatherings to showcase student accomplishments at the end of the academic year in both the Sunday school and the public school.

Some episodes in *Tom Sawyer* resemble the Alton story in less happy ways. The schoolmaster in the novel is a man who wanted to be a physician but was forced by poverty into teaching. Were similar things true of the staff at the Advanced School? The rate of turnover suggests this, as does the only (possible) reason cited for opposing a high school: the expense. The likely compromise was to pay staff frugally. And the series of briefly employed teachers whose names began mostly with "Miss" recalls a caustic critic of American education who wrote a century

after the events described here and who decried the status of public school teaching as “a lower-middle-class vocational preserve” and “an anteroom in which poor but respectable girls might occupy themselves while awaiting the possibility of marriage.”<sup>14</sup> That seemed the case early on, with Alton providing only one of many examples.

This takes nothing away from Alton’s Unitarians, journalists, and other proponents of public education. Though it has often been a struggle to support public schools, much of America’s economic, scientific, and cultural success can be credited to them—and to the people who made them their cause.

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The preceding was condensed from a chronology by Mary E. Johnson, historian of the First Unitarian Church of Alton. She drew on the church’s historical records; articles in Alton newspapers from 1854 through 1866, accessed via the newspapers.com database; and the Madison County IL GenWeb: <https://madison.illinoisgenweb.org/>.

For the general history of the congregation, see the church [website](#).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Freedom Moves West: A History of the Western Unitarian Conference 1852-1952* (Providence: Blackstone Editions © 2006), 106. First published 1952 by Beacon Press.
- <sup>2</sup> \$1.00 in 1855 is equivalent in purchasing power to \$29.47 in 2020, according to the CPI Inflation Calculator, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1855>.
- <sup>3</sup> Though Latin is listed among the courses, the phrase “English education” is presumably meant to distinguish the curriculum from the heavy emphasis on classical languages found in more traditional schools.
- <sup>4</sup> “High School.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 3 Dec. 1857: 1.
- <sup>5</sup> “Proceedings of the City Council.” *Alton Daily Courier*, 25 June 1858: 2.
- <sup>6</sup> “The Advanced School.” *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, 17 June 1858: 1. “Public Schools.” *Alton Daily Courier*, 20 Aug. 1858: 2. .
- <sup>7</sup> “Advanced City School Exhibition.” *Alton Daily Courier*, 9 Nov. 1858: 3. .
- <sup>8</sup> “City Council Meeting.” *Alton Daily Telegraph*, 2 April 1859: 3. Atwood later became the Alton Superintendent of Schools. .
- <sup>9</sup> “Advanced School Exhibition.” *Alton Daily Courier*, 22 April 1859: 3.
- <sup>10</sup> “The Advanced School Exhibition.” *Daily Alton Courier* 25 April 1859: 3. .
- <sup>11</sup> “Advanced School.” *Alton Telegraph*, 6 July 1866: 3.
- <sup>12</sup> “Advanced School.” *Alton Telegraph*, 6 July 1866: 3.
- <sup>13</sup> “From the High School.” *Alton Telegraph*, 30 Nov. 1866: 3.
- <sup>14</sup> Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *Coming of Age in America* (New York: Random House, 1965).