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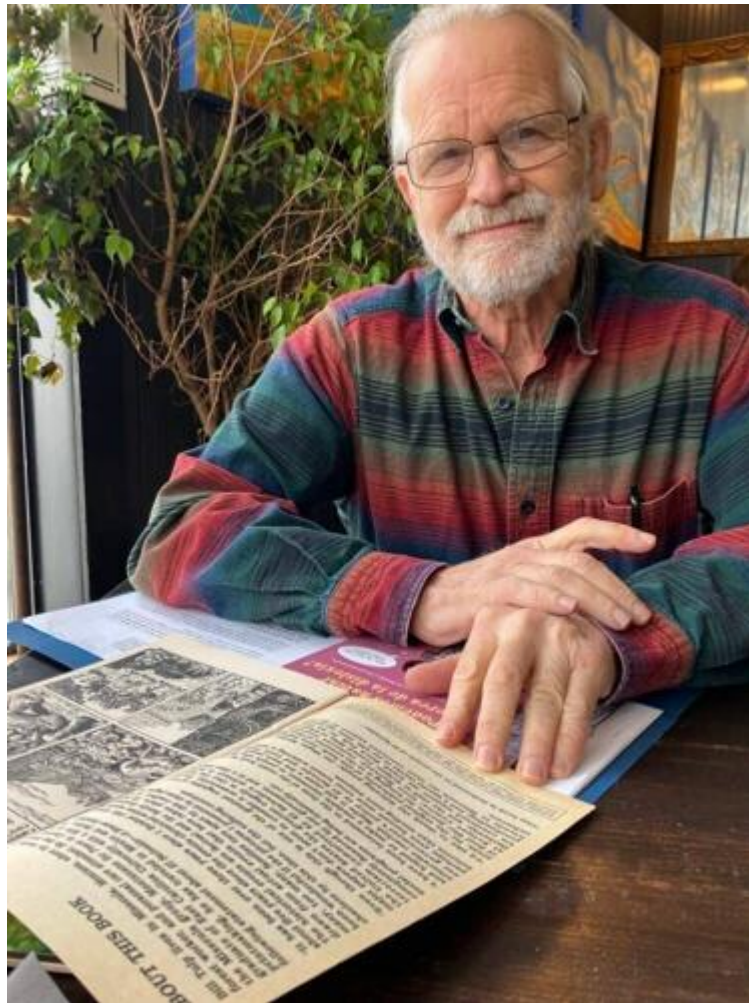
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EDITOR'S PICK

St. Johnsbury Local Artist, Author, Releases Graphic Biography On The Life And Times Of Alexander Twilight

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St. Johnsbury author and artist Bill Tulp poses with some of his earlier graphic stories he has published, and the new title he and illustrated, *The Life and Times of Alexander Twilight*. (Photo by Amy Ash Nixon)

ST. JOHNSBURY — Bill Tulp, an artist and writer who has published a handful of graphic nonfiction stories in comic book and magazine format throughout his career, just released a 21-page graphic biography that chronicles *The Life and Times of Alexander Twilight*.

Twilight is celebrated for his tenure and leadership at the Orleans County Grammar School where his vision made possible the construction of the stone dormitory at the school now called the Old Stone House Museum. He also was both the first person of African heritage to graduate from an American college and the first person of Black ancestry to be elected to a state legislature.

Tulp's new book, published by Onion River Press in Burlington, Vermont, is the result of a grant-funded project made possible by the Northeastern Vermont Development Association via the Northern Border Regional Commission and the Vermont Arts Council. His proposal was one of four chosen by the Old Stone House Museum & Historic Village's team of jurors as part of an "Open For Interpretation Artists" call.



In an interview Sunday, Tulp shared that he always had a deep interest in art and earned his degree in painting and printmaking from East Carolina University. He has worked as an art teacher, environmental educator, illustrator, portrait artist, gardener, forest worker and other roles throughout his career.

In 1989, he published a 44-page graphic novel, *El Salvador: A House Divided* with Eclipse Comics. He has long had a special interest in comics and visual storytelling, according to the 'About the Author' page in his just-out new book.

Tulp teaches art at the East Burke School and gives workshops locally, including a mosaics class this past weekend at Catamount Arts in St. Johnsbury.

“I’ve always been interested in comics,” shared Tulp.

Tulp has also done illustrations for a series of books about challenges children face such as dyslexia, which have been published in multiple languages.

Of his latest project, Tulp said his wife Dana has been assisting with programs at the Old Stone House Museum for some time, and told him about the grant opportunity for artists to interpret Alexander Twilight. Tulp has likewise spent a good amount of time at the museum, so is well familiar with its history and mission.

“I thought, ‘Why don’t I do a graphic biography about Alexander Twilight?’ ” said Tulp. “It is a book about Alexander Twilight, but it’s also a book dealing with the whole period and what was going on.”

The research required to tell the story and to visualize it - in an era that pre-dates photography (there is one Daguerreotype photo of Alexander Twilight and his wife, taken between 1839 and 1857) “turned out to be more extensive than I anticipated,” shared Tulp.

“I think Alexander Twilight was able to get where he was because he was well-educated, and he was really strong-willed,” said Tulp. “He liked to get his own way, but he was very popular with a lot of people because he was able to push things through, basically get things done. He had a following of people who really liked what he was doing, but he also had people he butted heads with.”

His graphic biography begins with Twilight’s father Ichabod Twilight’s story, in 1765 when he was born in Boston, the story opens, “The child of a black father, and, most likely, a white mother who was an indentured servant.” His mother died from childbirth complications and his father died within the first year of his life.

The book relies on extensive research Tulp conducted with help from many people and sources, all of whom are acknowledged in the book, and sources are cited in the book’s bibliography.

The Life and Times of Alexander Twilight

Ichabod Twilight was known to have enlisted in the American Revolution as a private in the Continental Army 2nd NH Division from 1782 to 1783.

There is little information in public records on Ichabod for the years following the war, but in 1791, he married Mary (no surname was found) in Plattsburgh, New York.

Two years later, Congress in 1793 enacted a fugitive slave act Tulp's book lays out, which gave slave owners the right to recover enslaved individuals who had escaped.

"Ichabod had no papers to prove he was a freeborn black," Tulp writes. "He and Mary must have been aware of the new state of Vermont, which outlawed all adult slavery (males at age 21 and females at 18). To be there meant to be free."

"Perhaps that's why they moved to Bradford, VT in 1793," writes Tulp. The couple had had a son, Aaron, earlier, and their second son, Thomas, was born in Vermont but did not survive.

In 1794 "Ichabod took the freeman's oath, which gave him the right to vote at town meeting and made him a full citizen of Bradford," Tulp writes. He likely found work farming as a tenant farmer or laborer. Tulp is careful in the book to make clear when there is not absolute public record to say something as fact, and he makes inferences where there is a gap in research bearing out what may be part of oral tradition but can't be backed up with documents.

On Sept. 23, 1795, Tulp writes, "The Twilights had their third child, Alexander Lucius. Their only daughter, Polly, was born two years later."

In 1798, the family moved to Corinth, Vermont, where Tulp writes, "According to Corinth town history, they were the 'first Negroes to settle in Corinth.'" They bought 50 acres of land to farm.

The family had to sell their farm a few years later due to difficulties, and Tulp writes that "There is evidence that Ichabod remained on the property as a tenant farmer."

In the year 1806, "Young Alexander was indentured to a neighbor, William Bowen, as a working apprentice in exchange for room and board," Tulp writes. "Along with his farm chores, Alex went to the district school with the Bowen children learning reading, writing and arithmetic. He went to church with the family on Sundays."

Alexander in 1815 enrolled in the Orange County Grammar School in Randolph, about 20 miles away.



According to Tulp's book, "The school prepared students for college and to be public school teachers."

"In 1821, at the age of 26, Alexander enrolled at Middlebury (College) taking classes that included surveying, trigonometry, philosophy, navigation, astronomy, composition, logic and Greek literature... He had a special interest in theology..." Tulp writes. "In 1823, he graduated at the first identifiable person of African heritage to graduate from an American college."

In 1828, he took a teaching job in Vergennes and in neighboring towns, having to walk as far as 5 miles each way to preach in all seasons.

"People took notice and he was soon offered a more prestigious position in Brownington, Vermont," writes Tulp. A drawing from that chapter of his life beginning shows a parent shaking his hand and telling him, "Our kids can not stop talking about Mr. Twilight when they come home from school!"

He began work in 1829 as the principal of the Orleans County Grammar School and was ordained as the acting minister of the Brownington Congregational Church.

This chapter in Tulp's book is titled, "The Home of My Choice."

The school's curriculum closely mirrored that of Middlebury College noted Tulp and students studied 10 hours a day. "Alexander was known as a progressive educator and thought teaching our youth was the most important job you could have."

He was affectionately known as Father Twilight, writes Tulp and Mercy Twilight was looked to as a mother figure for the students, cooking their meals and keeping the school in order, Tulp writes.

Twilight's vision to build the stone dormitory that is the Old Stone House Museum today was controversial, but he was determined to see it through, resigning as pastor in 1834 to focus on the "grand design" writes Tulp. "He had plans drawn up for a 4-story granite dorm 33 feet by 66 feet in dimension."

Local lore touched on in the book has it that "Alexander built the dormitory all by himself with only the help of a single ox!"

"When they finished and got to the top, the ox would not go down the steps built inside the wall," Tulp writes. "The ox was butchered where it was and used to celebrate the completion of the dormitory."

"The facts do not bear this out, but the legend persisted," captures Tulp. "A lot of support came from the community for funding and labor," for the grand stone building. "Alexander gave the dorm the classical name of Athenian Hall, but it is usually referred to as the Old Stone House."

Twilight borrowed a lot of money to finance the stone house, and Tulp writes that the debt plagued him until his death.

He ran because of concerns over school funding for a seat in the Vermont Legislature and was elected, being sworn in in 1836 as the first American of black ancestry to be elected to a state assembly.

The issue Twilight hoped to influence over school funding and which he opposed passed as law and he left the legislature after a single term. More secondary schools opened around the county as a result of the funding change.

There were difficult years ahead for him, conflicts with the school and church leadership, and he was burdened by debt. In 1847, Alexander and the school went their separate ways, writes Tulp. He went on to work at a school in Quebec, over the border, then a second teaching job also in Quebec after that.

Brownington Academy, in the meantime closed, and trustees asked him to return. He did so at the age of 56 in the year 1852, and, writes Tulp, "Townpeople, friends and former students celebrated his return."

He resumed his roles as principal at the school and minister at the church, but Twilight was unable to boost the school's enrollment.

In 1855, he suffered a stroke which left him paralyzed and unable to run the school. He died June 19, 1857 "deeply in debt and was buried in the cemetery beside the Congregational Church by the school in the 'home of his choice,' " writes Tulp.

Mercy, his widow, turned Athenian Hall into a boarding house and tavern to try to make a living after losing Alexander, writes Tulp.

In 1865, she sold their beloved Athenian Hall to a friend and moved to Derby, Vermont, to live with relatives. She died in 1878 and was buried beside Alexander in Brownington.

Every September 23, the museum celebrates Alexander Twilight Day on the day of his birth.

A new portrait of Alexander Lucius Twilight by Katie Runde hangs at the Vermont Statehouse, after being installed in May of last year.

On March 18th, Tulp will explore his graphic biography methodology by offering a class to families at the Old Stone House Museum's Grammar School. Titled *Graphic Stories, The Life and Times of Alexander Twilight*, the author/illustrator will reveal his methods of graphic storytelling.

The book, published and distributed by Onion River Press, will be retailing for \$12.99 at local bookstores in February and at the Old Stone House Museum Gift Shop bookstore on May 15th. Wholesale distribution prices by inquiry to the author directly at BillTulpArt@gmail.com.

A book release gathering celebrating Tulp's work is slated to take place at the Old Stone House Museum's Grammar School on Hinman Settler Rd., next door to the Brownington Church, on Sun. Feb. 26th, from 1:30-3:30 PM (snow date on March 5th 1:30-3:30 PM). The event will begin with Tulp leading a short presentation on the process he used in creating the work. The event is free and open to the public.

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