

Graphic novel tells tale of Alexander Twilight

by Trisha Ingalls

BROWNINGTON — A new biography of Alexander Twilight was officially released February 26 at the Old Stone House Museum, this time in the form of a graphic novel. Artist Bill Tulp, who wrote and illustrated *The Life and Times of Alexander Twilight: A Graphic Biography*, presented to about 30 people who made their way to the former Orleans County Grammar School in a snowstorm.

Dana Karuza, associate director of on-site education at the Old Stone House Museum, introduced Mr. Tulp, and said the gathering was not just a celebration of the book, but a celebration of the legacy of Mr. Twilight. She said she hopes all local schools will get copies of the book and integrate them into their curricula.

Mr. Tulp was selected as one of four “Open for Interpretation” artists to work on grant-funded interpretive art projects at the Old Stone House Museum.

He began his presentation by going back to when he first got started with what he called visual storytelling. Mr. Tulp said he always loved art and drawing, and used to get comic books at the drug store as soon as they came out.

“I was fascinated by the integration of the words and the pictures,” he said. “The ways you could manipulate the drawings and the panels, the ways you use the narration and the word balloons, and you basically tell a story. You create your own world, you can interpret somebody else’s stories; I guess it felt similar to film in a lot of ways, but it was something you could do more personally. With film you had to have all these people to

do it, but with comics you could tell your own story, with just a couple of people collaborating. You could tell the whole story with that.”

Mr. Tulp’s first major experiment with graphic storytelling took place when he lived in Missoula, Montana, and became involved in a social justice movement for El Salvador, which led to his first comic book. It was called *El Salvador: A House Divided*. Holding it up, he showed his audience how he starts with a large piece of Bristol board and creates the story to a scale that will then be reduced for printing. The lesson he learned with his first project was not to do the whole thing at once without checking how it would look printed — it came out too dark, and he had to go back and do much of his artwork again.

Mr. Tulp talked about early challenges of where his work fit — or didn’t — in the literary world. When comic book stores opened they wanted to focus on superheroes and science fiction, whereas traditional bookstores didn’t see comics as serious enough for them to sell. Things turned around in 1978 when Will Eisner wrote *A Contract with God*, four short stories in comic book style about growing up in the Jewish tenements of New York City. He may have been the one to coin the phrase, “graphic novel.”

Following that, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman was the first graphic novel to be admitted to bookstores as a serious piece of art, and many graphic novels for adults and children followed.

Mr. Tulp said he applied for the grant to take on the project at the Old Stone House Museum because he had worked for the museum before and found Mr. Twilight an



Bill Tulp, author of *The Life and Times of Alexander Twilight: a Graphic Biography*, talks about his lifetime of creating graphic stories and his process for creating Mr. Twilight’s biography. Photos by Trisha Ingalls

interesting, charismatic character who would lend himself well to being portrayed in a graphic novel.

He used ink wash to create his artwork; except for the cover, the graphic biography is in black and white. Mr. Tulp said a creative story would have been faster to write and draw, but because this one involved extensive historical research it took him about six months. The story spans the years 1795 to 1857. He started with the life of Mr. Twilight’s father, Ichabod, because he thought his story showed a lot of what was happening in this area during that time period.

Sometimes, Mr. Tulp had to

imagine what things looked like, or rely on historians for his efforts. For example, there used to be a bell tower on the building of the grammar school, but it was removed when the school itself was moved. Bob Hunt, associate director of operations at the Old Stone House Museum, found him pictures of what it could have looked like so he could draw an accurate bell tower on the grammar school.

In another panel, he drew Mr. Twilight at Middlebury College surrounded by boys and girls; however, William Hart let him know there wouldn’t have been any girls at Middlebury College at that time, and Mr. Tulp had to change them to boys.

William B. Hart, retired professor emeritus of history at Middlebury College, was an important resource for Mr. Tulp during the creation of the graphic novel. Mr. Hart is writing a biography about Alexander Twilight and the ambiguities of race, something which Mr. Tulp conceded was difficult to navigate in his artistic portrayal of Mr. Twilight.

“His race was ambiguous,” Mr. Tulp said. “His father and grandfather were both biracial, his students described him as olive-skinned. It made it hard to work with.”

In an interview following the book launch, Old Stone House Museum Executive Director Molly Veysey addressed the ambiguities of Mr. Twilight’s race and the importance of his legacy.

“Alexander Twilight was the first person of African descent to graduate from a U.S. college — Middlebury in 1823 — and also to have been an elected state official anywhere in the country when he was elected to the Vermont House (Continued on page 21.)

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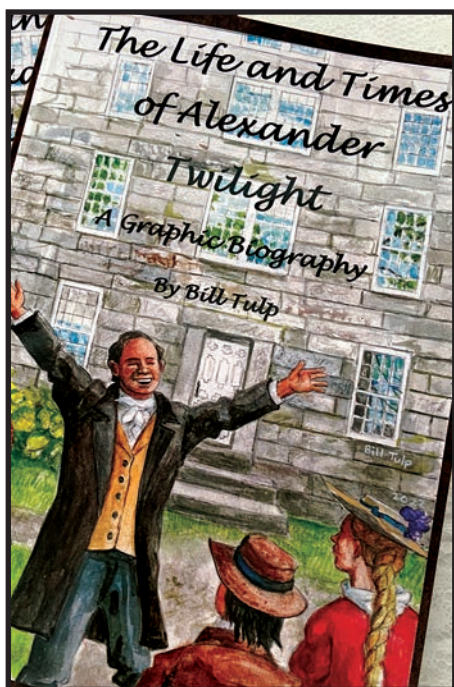
Graphic biography engaging representation of his life

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in 1836," Ms. Veysey said. "Mr. Twilight's racial ambiguity is dispelled by early census records, which clearly identify Alexander's father and family unit as African American. Artists, like Mr. Tulp, have to do an enormous amount of research and imagining to turn the one daguerreotype of Mr. Twilight available into images with personality and motion."

During the creation of the story Mr. Tulp would send drafts of the texts and drawings to Mr. Hart and others for review. For the introduction to the book, he drew on an article written by late Irasburg author Howard Frank Mosher published in *Vermont Life* magazine titled, "Alexander Twilight and One of the Last Best Places."

"I like the way the Stone House still looms up on that hilltop, where the wind blows all the time," Mr. Mosher wrote. "There it sits, unshaken and monolithic, as I write this sentence and as you read it,



The cover of *The Life and Times of Alexander Twilight: a Graphic Biography*, written and illustrated by Bill Tulp.

every bit as astonishing today as the day it was completed.

"What a tribute to the faith of its creator, the Reverend Alexander Twilight: scholar, husband, teacher, preacher, legislator, father-away-from-home to nearly 3,000 boys and girls, an African American and a Vermonter of great vision, whose remains today lie buried in the church-yard just up the maple-lined dirt road from his granite school, in what surely was, and still is, one of the last best places anywhere."

The graphic biography itself is an engaging visual representation of Mr. Twilight's life, beginning with the birth of his father, Ichabod Twilight. It is divided up chronologically but also thematically into sections, like Mr. Twilight's youth as an indentured farmworker, and his early teaching years. It goes on to describe "the difficult years," his legacy, and a page called

"fact or legend?" that Mr. Tulp said he did in a different style — without the story panels — to give Mr. Twilight a mythic quality similar to Paul Bunyan. One page includes samples of notes written by Mr. Twilight's students in 1888, who seemed to regard him fondly.

The slim volume also has information and color photos from the Old Stone House Museum and an extensive bibliography that bears out Mr. Tulp's extensive research efforts.

The book, published and distributed by Onion River Press, will be selling for \$12.99 at local bookstores immediately, and at the Old Stone House Museum Gift Shop bookstore in the spring. The book can also be purchased directly from the author by emailing billtulpart@gmail.com.

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