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Judith Stanton

Bridgewater State College

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Nathaniel T. Allen:

Social and Educational Activist

By Judith Stanton

N.T. Allen was one of Bridgewater's most outstanding alumni. A free thinker in education, in women's rights, and in the abolition of slavery, Allen was also a man of action who put ideas into practice. His greatest achievement was the creation of the Allen (West Newton English and Classical) School. Progressive in the purest sense of the word, this school was on the cutting edge of social and educational reform for almost fifty years.

The Allen school was private and non-sectarian with both day and boarding students. Some were from wealthy and elite foreign families; some were from free thinking families in the local area; some were orphans and some were the children of slaves from the South. Radical for its time, its goals were social and political as well as educational. Its goal was to educate the whole person - in body, mind and morals. Education of body and mind meant vigorous physical training for both sexes, and a careful application of "every advance that sane pedagogy made available." The curriculum offered preparation in classics, science, business, and teaching, but its major goal was character development. Allen wanted to draw his students out, to help them analyze controversial issues, and to teach them to think for themselves.

The Allen school educated approximately four thousand students. A newspaper article marking the 100th anniversary of Allen's birth listed Allen's students as coming from every state and territory of the Union, from North and South America, from Europe and the Orient. In 1854, the year of its inception, the school received the first Cuban to enter a school in the United States, and in 1872 it received several of the first company of Japanese students to enter this country. One of these students was Tanetaro Megata of Tokyo, Japan, who performed the remarkable feat of learning the English Language, fitting for college, and entering Harvard without conditions all in the short space of eighteen months. While Megata was a student at the Allen school in 1872, he gave the first lecture ever delivered in English by a native of Japan. Megata went on to graduate from Harvard Law School in 1874, and from the Boston School of

Oratory in 1879. He returned to Japan to hold several important political posts.

One of the chief strengths of the Allen school was its curriculum. In addition to English, history, mathematics and languages, the Allen school was one of the first to emphasize natural sciences such as botany and geology. Horacè Mann joked that when he moved his family to Antioch his children's trunks were so heavy with mineral specimens they had collected with Allen that he should have charged Allen for the freight.



Nathaniel Allen, as he looked while at Bridgewater Normal School, circa 1845

The Allen school was a pioneer in co-educational physical education. The Allens built the first bowling alley in West Newton, dammed up the Cheesecake Brook to create a 5000 sq. ft. pond for swimming lessons and erected the first gymnasium building connected to a secondary school in the United States. There they introduced the rollerskate which had recently been invented by Allen's cousin James Plimpton and both boys and girls tried them out on the waxed floor.

The Allen school also had the first pure kindergarten as a department of a school in the United States. In many ways this kindergarten was the capstone to Allen's educational design and the concrete manifestation of his philosophy.

Nathaniel Allen came from good Pilgrim and Puritan stock. Born in 1823, Allen grew up in an era of new ideas and reform movements for which the intellectual drive and independent spirit characteristic of his family fitted him. Allen appreciated the importance of heredity, environment and lifestyle in his own development and in the development of his students. Allen said that three things go to make up a man's personal character: heredity, training, and individuality. In terms of heredity Allen seems to have been extremely fortunate. The Allens were known for their mental acuity, their talents in music and for physical strength and endurance. For example Allen's brother William, a farmer, machinist and close friend of Nathaniel P. Banks, a Civil War General and later Governor of Massachusetts, was famous as a runner. Allen himself was adept at wrestling and proud of his "uncommon" physical strength. After only two months of training he was able to lift 1150 pounds. Dr. Dio Lewis, the pioneer in physical education, said that Nathaniel Allen was the strongest man he knew. Strength however was not all a matter of muscle. His intellectual and professional responsibilities also made demands, and Allen stated late in his life that protracted work at his desk had also showed uncommon powers of endurance. Heredity was combined with the training in upright living as was demonstrated in Allen's family. Allen's father Ellis was a farmer all his life, but he was also an idealistic Unitarian who took the greatest interest in all moral reforms. Ellis Allen was an advocate of peace, temperance, women's rights and the abolition of slavery. Ellis was a friend of William Lloyd Garrison, Samuel J. May, Frederick Douglass and other opponents of slavery who, white and black, visited his farm. Ellis read anti-slavery and temperance periodicals such as *The Liberator* and the *Christian Register* and discussed their contents with his family. He took his wife and children to reform meetings. Since all the Allens were talented singers, they were welcomed immediately as part of the group. William Lloyd Garrison wrote that he would always remember Ellis Allen as "one of the tried

and true of the old guard of Freedom, whose feet were planted on the Everlasting Rock, whose faith and courage never faltered as to the ultimate triumph of the righteous cause."

These childhood influences taught Nathaniel Allen to value the principle of human dignity and to fight for the co-education of blacks and whites. When he heard that three black students planned to enter Bridgewater in the spring of 1846, he joined their cause determined not to begin the term unless they were admitted. "Mr. Tillinghast," he said, "though an abolitionist thought it prudent to consult the Board of Education as to their entrance. I waited the results determined not to enter myself unless those were admitted. Consent was given but for some cause they did not remain." Later, in 1852 when Allen traveled in the South he was well enough known as an abolitionist so that he was harassed and his mail was opened by the Post Office. Allen was part of the body-guard for Wendell Philips and William Garrison, and his house in Newton was a stop on the Underground Railroad.

When Allen started his own school in 1854 there was much excitement over the fugitive slave law. The school expanded during the Civil War and Reconstruction and during this time black students were welcomed into the school and treated both in the classroom and in the boarding families in the same way that the white students were. Usually this worked well because the principals arranged it all as a matter of course, and the pupils and their parents accepted it by force of example. However, there were times when this philosophy raised the ire of parents. Allen met their opposition with firm diplomacy. One southern father, on learning that there was a black student in the school, went to West Newton with the openly avowed intention of compelling Allen to send the black students away by threats to remove his own son. The father, however, had been warned that "with Mr. Allen a principle was involved, and that he would be more likely to suffer every white parent to withdraw his child than to send away a single colored one." Allen met with the father and explained his position, and both boys were allowed to remain at the school.

During Reconstruction black officials in the South sent their children to this school, which was almost the only institution, if not the only one of its kind in the country, where they could receive higher education. The son of P.B.S. Pinchback, lieutenant-governor of Louisiana, and the daughters of

C.C. Antoine of Louisiana and Robert Smalls of South Carolina, were educated at the Allen School among others equally well known, and there were many free black students at other periods, from the Bahamas and the West Indies.

Allen's contribution to the anti-slavery cause is illustrated in a letter to him from Frederick Douglass in 1882. Douglass, an escaped slave who had joined forces with the abolitionists, had been a visitor to Ellis Allen and Nathaniel had been well acquainted with him. Douglass spoke warmly of the Allen family: "I remember very well my visit to Medfield mall forty years ago. The world, good and bad, was then opening upon me with vigor. I shall

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never forget the kindness shown me by the dear Allen family -- Though I had much to contend with in the shape of prejudice and prescription, the sympathy and kindness I met among the antislavery people, your family among the number, was full compensation for all I had to endure of that sort."

Douglass spoke approvingly of Allen as a teacher, "I am glad to know that the school of which I have often heard in W. Newton is under your charge. I am sure that no harm can come to any from the lessons they learn under your care." He also spoke of his own yearning for education, "I have often regretted that my antislavery friends had not advised me to attend school for a while, before making a public speaker of me, but they were all too much in earnest to put down the slave power and abolish the 'scum of all villainies' to think much of schools or schooling for me. Upon the whole they may have persuaded the right course towards me. I have at any rate made under their kind guidance respectable way in the world."

Allen was as much an advocate of progress in teaching method as he was in social values. In fact the same concern for human dignity which underlay his

abolitionist views informed his procedures in the school room. The particulars of his training came once again from a combination of family influences and the Unitarian dedication to school reform.

Allen's observations of the learning process began with his own experiences as a student in the district schools of Waltham and Medfield. Allen developed a long account of his first school experiences in his *Reminiscences*, which he was writing at the time of his death in 1903. In Medfield he was taught "by men of varying teaching capacities. Sherman of Weston -- club feet -- with whose condition I sympathized - a good man... cross eyed who believed in corporal punishment, he watched us during prayer throwing a ruler to those he saw out of order. This they were to take to him and receive a blow from him as he took it. Warfield, the most unfit for school management of any teacher of mine. The most foolish class of punishments he practiced - Holding out books at arms end -- Picking up bits of paper one by one (prepared by him evenings) scattered on the floor -- holding down nails on the floor, sitting under a desk etc." Exasperated by this lack of reason, Allen rebelled and bedeviled the teacher until he gave up. "Being full of fun and roguish, I did my full part in bringing matters to a climax and the school was closed."

After the unpleasantness of his school experience in Waltham and Medfield, Allen was sent to Northboro to attend a school being taught by his older brother Joseph. His experience with Joseph influenced him profoundly. "I was taken to Northboro and attended the center school taught by brother Joseph. And what a change! Hon. Andrew D. White L.L.D. [later a President of Cornell] pronounced Joseph the best teacher he ever knew. Hundreds of other students myself included will affirm the same. In Joseph was seen a master mind, a genius. Wide awake creating enthusiasm and ambition to do the whole school of 60 to 70 pupils ranging from 10 yrs. to 20."

Early incidents helped form Nathaniel's ethics and ability to work with parents and school committees. Allen mentions Charles Hammond, "An old time teacher and manager of school including parents, pupils and school committee. Without much knowledge he knew human nature and common things. (He) managed schools without friction. Very shrewd and kept the regard and love of his pupils though not the deep respect which high moral traits alone can develop and retain. Mr. H. would train his classes and have the pupils repeat over

and over what they were to repeat to visitors and the School Committee at examination day as tho it was impromptu which the pupils knew was to deceive. With all this Charles Hammond had rare gifts as a successful teacher and awakener of an ambition in his pupils and their parents."

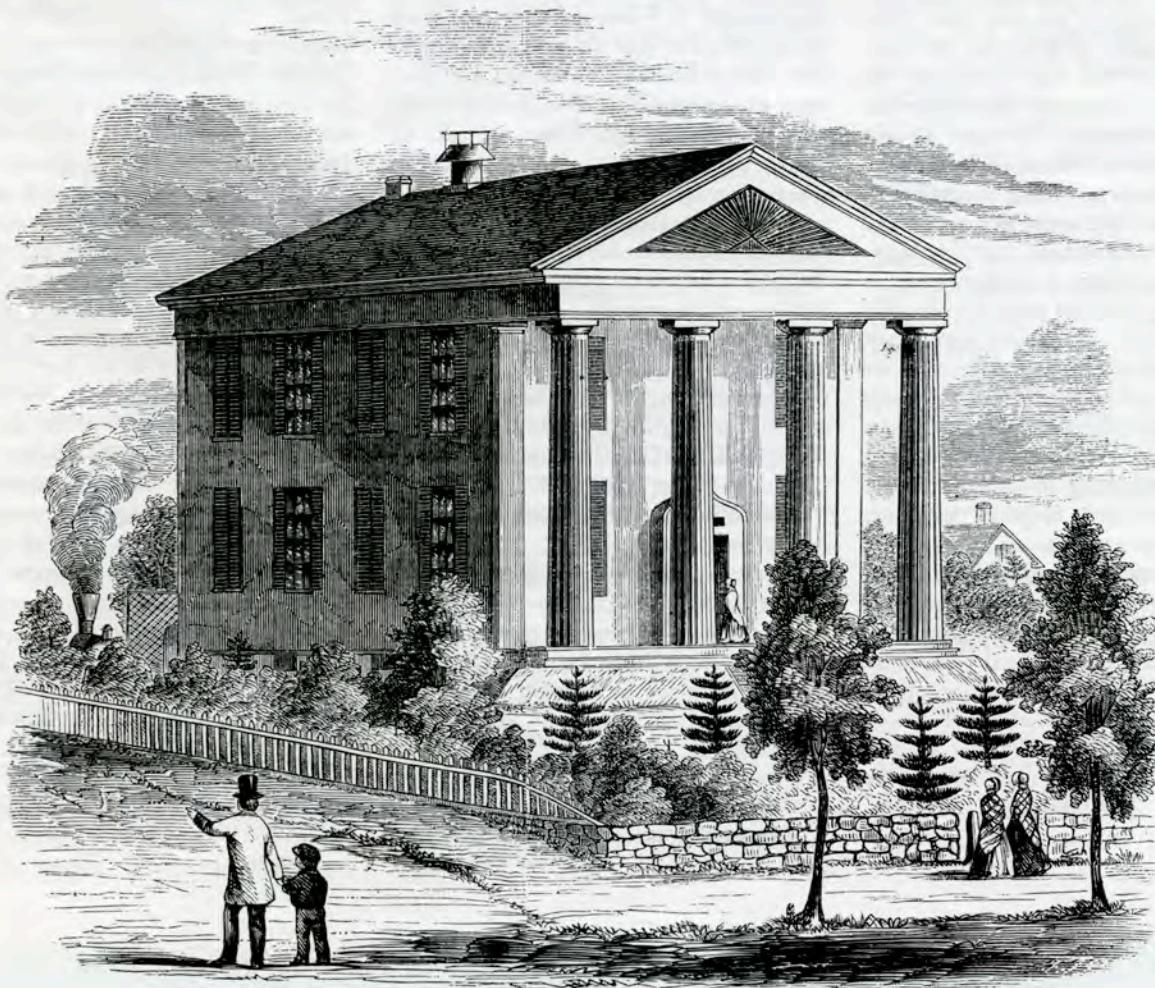
However, Allen soon found that he himself was not without some ethical conflicts. He used his Unitarian and family connections to obtain his first teaching position and cheated when he found himself unable to point a quill pen to the school committee's satisfaction. The usually moral and conscientious Allen was shocked at his own behavior. He wrote just before he died that the shame of that deception had remained with him for 58 years.

That he would do well in his first position was apparent on the first day. He appointed two students to be charge of pointing all the pens and his good sense, his humor and his generally good intentions won his students. He said in his initial remarks to his students that it was his desire to make a pleasant impression and to show, "that their teacher was one

with them in sympathy in their sports as in their studies etc. Learning that their teacher of the previous winter, Cousin Henry Plimpton, had left the school in disgust in the midst of the term, that during some noon day recess some roguish youth had placed upon the blackboard an enormously exaggerated drawing of the teacher's boots, I told them how unpleasant and disrespectful it was while their teacher's feet were no doubt large. Suppose you attempt to make a drawing of my nose. There would not be room upon the blackboard (the only blackboard in the room was but about two and a half by one and a half feet)." This brought a laugh as intended and the pleasant relations between pupils (consequently parents) and teacher was established and maintained to the end.

By 1844, Allen was teaching in Northfield, and it was there that he decided to make teaching his profession. His talents and his observations matured as he found himself free to work his own way: "I always ascribed my invitation to teach the large Center school that season to my

reputation for athletic prowess and perhaps my singing... It was at Northfield that whatever aptitude I possessed as teacher and trainer of youth, establishing cordial relations with parents and the community developed themselves. Here among strangers to self or family I was free to work in my own way with entire sympathy of pupils, School Committee and parents. To brother Joseph's... peculiar and rare management of the interior of a school, discipline and methods of class recitation very great credit was due. Added to this was an earnest wish to carry into the school the principles of Horace Mann so far as they were made known to me through Uncle Joseph and the public prints. Having seen much though never brutal corporal punishment in schools when a pupil, with never good results, I was quite ready to sympathize with the statement of Horace Mann: 'Other things being equal the minimum of punishment is the maximum of excellence.' This maxim I have always believed in and worked for its attainment... in public and private I have stood with Mr. Mann in principle and have to a great extent practiced in accord with the theory."



VIEW OF THE ALLEN SCHOOL, WEST NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Allen then goes on to explain why corporal punishment was such an issue. "Considering the universality of the custom of the infliction of corporal punishment in family and school and almost universal belief in its importance as an educational influence it is a gratification to recall my position on the above. Undoubtedly the 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' spirit mingling with the total depravity belief made it so difficult for the champions of Channing's more Christ like views to prevail. Another statement of Mr. Mann's made a lasting impression with me, 'As is the teacher so is the school'... Buildings - Textbooks, and Apparatus are useful but sink into insignificance compared with the teacher, Man or Woman..."

In August of 1845 twenty-one years old with eighty dollars in his pocket and a series of short teaching jobs under his belt Nathaniel Allen entered the Bridgewater Normal School. Allen was impressed by Nicholas Tillinghast and his assistant Christopher Greene. He described Tillinghast as "an all round gentleman, teacher and educator. He described them both as "two royal men admirably adapted to the work." Greene he described as one of the best teachers he ever had, and Tillinghast he said "inspired his students with admiration for his character, an embodiment of clearness, thoroughness, and exact truthfulness. Each Mr. T. and Mr. G. broad souled, liberal minded moral reformers. It was a liberal education to come under the influence of two such men. The system of instruction was thoroughness personified. Clear as sunlight."

Allen kept a detailed journal during his stay at Bridgewater. It included notes about the subject matter and comments about application of the subjects especially math to teaching. He seems to have been very clear about his professional goals. "Extremely interesting to us," he wrote, "were the new and original methods, analysis etc., the habit of independent thought. Perhaps two thirds of our class, the 17th, had taught previously so were somewhat mature in their development. Then as Mr. Mann's educational views were still unpopular with the Trinitarian clergy with rare exception the class of young persons who attended the Normal Schools were largely drawn from the more progressive [Unitarian] families.

These Unitarians were not all seriousness, however. Combining physical challenge with fun, they swam in Carver's Pond every morning at 5:30 a.m. from August to Thanksgiving, even when the pond was frozen around the edges.

The program at Bridgewater was one year long, and Allen finished in the spring of 1846. He then went to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute at Troy, New York. His letters from this period indicate that he was enthusiastic about science and a serious student. When he finished his courses at Rensselaer he was invited to stay as a teacher, but he returned to Massachusetts to become head of the Model Department at the Normal school in West Newton (now Framingham State College). There he worked closely with Cyrus Peirce who had brought the Normal School from Lexington to West Newton. Peirce was an outstanding example of thoughtful philosophy, kind heart, practical method, and hard work. An examination of journals kept by students Peirce taught at West Newton shows many of the techniques used later by Allen, and it is clear that Allen learned a lot from Cyrus Peirce.

When the Normal School moved from West Newton to Framingham, Horace Mann advised Allen to start his own school in the now vacant building. Because his goals were too progressive to engender public support, Allen thought it best to make his school a private one, and so in 1854 he teamed up with the older Peirce as co-principal to found the English and Classical School. Peirce taught classics and philosophy and Allen taught English and the natural sciences. They also offered training in modern languages, drawing, and music. Tuition per quarter was \$10.00 for the Common English Branches, \$12.50 for the Higher English Branches, \$15.00 for Music and the College Course. Modern Languages (were) \$5.00 each."

When Peirce retired, Allen drew on the considerable talents of his family, particularly those of his brothers, who served as teachers and co-principals at various times. Over the years, sixteen members of the Allen family taught at the school. As many as 8 taught at one time, and together they served an aggregate of 255 years.

The curriculum sought to cultivate clear thought and exact reasoning and to teach the student to use his mind as a tool for

life's work. To this end the Allens taught science, government, political economy, modern literature, ancient and modern history and current events in a day when most schools were limited to the classics, mathematics and English grammar. Each student was encouraged to study one modern language and one accomplishment, either drawing, painting or music. The Allens wanted to improve the teaching of English, so they experimented with new ways of teaching spelling, and taught their students to write by assigning written responses to the issues raised by the flood of controversial guest lecturers who visited the school. The students were also asked to keep journals which were collected and commented upon by the teachers each week.

In 1862 Allen announced his intention to start a kindergarten, and in 1863 he engaged Louise Pollock, a teacher thoroughly grounded in Frobelian methods, to be in charge. Mrs. Pollock wrote pioneering literature on kindergarten organization, and later ran the kindergarten Normal Institute in Washington, D.C.

Students of all ages and all races at the Allen school lived in school families parented by the Allen brothers and their wives. They were encouraged to grow gardens and keep pets so that they would develop compassion and responsibility. As an extension of this philosophy Allen started an agricultural department at the family farm in Medfield.

In 1869 Allen was sent as an agent of the U.S. Commissioner of Education to evaluate the school system in Germany, a system which Allen decided was efficient but which created schools that were "government" not "public and common," and which could never put children in "possession of manhood as we understand true manhood to be." This manhood or citizenship was, in Allen's words, "a broad and intelligent freedom restrained only by those laws of ... country which are in accordance with the laws of God."

Nathaniel Allen worked hard for enlightened schools and an enlightened society. Unfortunately, when he retired the spirit of his school retired with him. True to form, however, he was industriously working at writing out his philosophy the day before he died on August 1, 1903.

Judith Stanton is Professor of English