

Driving Forces: Allyn was “a saint according to any yardstick”

By Rebekah Davis

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Note: This is the sixth in a series of articles sharing the stories behind the names of some local streets.

“Love has a big heart and long arms,” Fred Brownlee wrote in 1939. “Wherever Miss Allyn goes, Trinity will be in her heart and Athens in her embrace. She will not forget and she will not be forgotten.”

Although the generations have passed – and many have passed on – since Brownlee made this statement about Trinity School Principal Louise Allyn, her name lives on, written on the short stretch of road that lies between the former Trinity High School and Miller Public School, and in the hearts and minds of former students and their families.

As Charlotte Fulton wrote in *Holding the Fort* , “The last Union soldiers had been gone from Athens less than 40 years when October 1909 saw the arrival of Louise Hurlbut Allyn, who would preside over Trinity School for the next 31 years with a devotion that prompted Fred Brownlee, retired general secretary of the American Missionary Association and Allyn’s longtime friend, to eulogize her in 1951 as ‘a saint according to any yardstick anyone cares to apply.’”

Allyn once wrote that Negro spirituals inspired her to enter the AMA’s southern field as a missionary. Born in 1870 in Brooklyn, N.Y., Allyn grew up in Connecticut, where in training to become a teacher she learned of the AMA’s work in the South.

Allyn arrived to a Trinity recently rebuilt within the walls of the former Fort Henderson, following a 1907 fire, and immediately put on the many hats of Trinity principal. A typical day would include chapel, academic lessons, and vocational training, as well as fixing problems with the furnace or delving into missionary barrels to share clothing with community members.

Trinity was growing in number, as well in positive influence in the community, when the building again went up in flames in 1913. In face of this disaster, Allyn remained positive, writing, “Altogether we feel that what seems a calamity will surely prove a blessing in disguise and that out of the ashes will arise a yet more beautiful Trinity to do a still nobler work.”

By the next year, Trinity had a new building, which stood until 1959, and there Allyn spent two more decades educating and praying for hundreds of students. Her work paid off as many of those students continued to share that positive influence as teachers, business leaders, clergy, doctors, judges, and more, often giving credit to Allyn for her direction.

Allyn’s perspective was that of a sculptor, releasing the beauty of a carved angel from an unhewn rock. “There is an angel in every one of our boys and girls; we have seen it with the sculptor’s vision and it is with exceeding great joy that we hack away day after day at the stony prison of sin and ignorance and watch the lines of beauty appear one by one until a lovely character steps forth, or a remarkable intellect,” Allyn wrote in a letter to northern supporters.

In 1940, Allyn retired from Trinity and moved back to Connecticut, but her heart remained at Trinity. She missed being at the school, “not for pay but to be in the thick of the fray,” she wrote in 1945, and in 1949, she returned for one last visit, to give the baccalaureate address.

Allyn died in Connecticut in 1951, at age 81, and in her obituary, her old friend Brownlee wrote, “She crowned the procession of New England Congregational Christian women who went South to help freedmen become free men.”

Note: Information for this article came from Holding the Fort: A History of Trinity School in Athens, Alabama 1865-1970.

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