

Alice King Ebey lived and worked as a missionary teacher in India for over three decades. Her diaries and letters tell a story of grief and hardship a century ago, yet her life still teaches us of courage, compassion and hope for today.

Only One Alice: The Teaching Life of Alice King Ebey

By Janice Shull

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*The Story of My Life On The
India Mission Field.*

Alice King Ebey.

ONLY ONE ALICE

The Teaching Life of Alice King Ebey

JANICE SHULL

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CHAPTER ONE
“My memory leads me back”
1871 – 1890, Wabash County, Indiana

November 11, 1888

The lamplight cast its yellow reflection on the first page of her new brown notebook, the one in which she had carefully written “Alice King’s Diary: 1888-1889” on the first page. She scrutinized the letters closely and wished for a more elegant form to her handwriting. When her mother handed Alice the package that morning on her seventeenth birthday, she said, “I seen you writing on scraps and bits. So now you can set your words down in this book where they’ll stay put.” It felt good to be noticed as an author.

Putting the pen to paper, the words began to flow from some secret source as she wrote, *My memory leads me back through the past to the time when I was a child of only three or four years old.* Yes, she remembered her first home, an old log house which belonged to her grandparents, the geometry of that space, the straight dark lines of the logs separated by the gray chinks between, the intersecting angles of walls and roof and door, the way her small hands would trace the curve of the old logs. Memories spilled out and onto the lined pages.

Diary of Alice King

I then had one brother, John, a little more than a year older than myself, and a sister Sarah, two years younger. We were a happy trio, playing together in Grandfather’s pleasant garden, in the large barn, or in the shady orchard. I will never forget the kindness of my grandparents. I laughed when Grandpa Grisso would take me on his knee and tell me stories or say the Dutch abc’s and make me repeat

funny words in Dutch.¹ Then, too, I had romps with my uncles and such jolly times with mother, grandmother and Aunt Phebe.

On a winter day in 1876 we moved into a small frame house that my father had built on the south edge of Grandpa's farm. A year later Dora came to bless our home and in 1878 another girl arrived, named Phebe for my mother's sister. Now we were a quintet, three blond and blue-eyed offshoots of our father and two brown-haired, brown-eyed semblances of Mother.

My little boat drifted serenely down life's stream without any apparent cloud until I was nine. Scarlet fever visited our little town of Laketon in 1880 and one of my favorite classmates died. School was closed and quarantine signs appeared on many houses. And then Dora, our cherubic baby sister, became feverish and within a few days her spirit took flight to its home in realms of bliss. How we missed her from our home circle! My brother and sisters and I used to go from one place to another where we had played, touching her playthings and longing to see her. But I have long since learned that God's way is sometimes not our way and Oh, how consoling is the thought that Little Dora is still watching by the beautiful gate for us to come up to the city of glory. It is sad, it is grief which this world fails to console, but the blessed bible assures us that we shall meet them again.

Father worked hard for other men, earning small wages as a hired hand and farmer's helper. At times he would go into Manchester to work on Monday morning and would not return home until Saturday evening. Mother kept the house clean, tended the garden, cooked our food, sewed clothes, and taught us our letters from the Bible when we were very young. We learned to help her with the chores as soon as we could follow directions.

We girls learned to milk the cow and gather eggs, but brother John detested the farm duties, and his eyes glimmered with wanderlust. Father grew tired of listening to his constant complaints and when

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John was ten years old, Father announced that it was time for John to become useful in the world. Father had recently subscribed to the village newspaper and each week would read its motto in a most solemn voice, "Laketon Free Press: Independence, Fearless, and True." These words impressed John, who begged Father to take him to meet Mr. Will A. Wells, publisher of the Laketon newspaper. John told me later that as soon as he smelled the ink and watched Mr. Wells operate the Acorn printing press, he knew that he had found his calling. On his first day of work, July 2, 1881, John rushed in the door to tell us of the headline he helped typeset. President James A. Garfield had been shot by an assassin. Nothing could keep him away from the excitement of the newspaper office after that.

After the school term ended in June of 1882, Mr. Wells paid Father a visit and asked for John to be present in the room also. With our ears pressed tightly to the closed parlor door, Sarah, Phebe and I heard Mr. Wells say that he had sold his Laketon press and intended to move to Illinois. Father eventually gave in to John's pleading to let him go with Mr. and Mrs. Wells to Utica for the summer. John left the next morning, just twelve years old and already started on life's adventures. He returned to Laketon for the school term in October, full of stories about how he had helped Mr. Wells start up The Utica Gazette. John continued working as a typesetter for Mr. Wells in the summer and attending school in the winter until he completed grammar school in 1886. Mr. and Mrs. Wells had moved again and established The Alton Democrat, and that spring he left us for the wilds of the west, way out in Iowa, which seemed to us like another country.

On January 31, 1884, with snow falling on our wagon full of household goods, we moved to a farm on the west side of the nearby town of North Manchester.² A distance of three miles now separated us from Grandpa and Grandma, and my life changed course. Our new place was just across the road from Pleasant Township District School

No. 6, which was a long name for a one-room schoolhouse. The year before, the schoolmaster had dignified it with the grand name of "Acme School" painted on a board above the door, and after he explained that "acme" meant the best or the pinnacle, the community voted to adopt the name officially. And so it was that I entered Acme School, lonely for my grandparents and friends at Laketon and certain that I would never make the grade or be accepted into this new group of scholars. The heart of a twelve-year-old is easily broken but just as quickly mended. It only took the smile and a wave from a sunny-faced girl named Bertha Miller, who lived across the road, to cheer me up on that first day of school.

Most of the residents of the area around Acme School belonged to the German Baptist Brethren Church, as did my parents, and in 1875 the county erected a new brick school on a lot adjacent to the church building. This proximity only strengthened the bonds of community spirit between the church and school, for our behavior at school during the week could not be hidden from the church members on Sunday.³ My mind awakened to a sense of duty and I began to feel that I was treading the paths of sin. For a long time, I tried to push away the feeling that I was neglecting my Christian duty but the working of the Spirit was strong. In May 1886, at age fourteen, I was baptized in the creek at West Manchester and became a member of the German Baptist Brethren Church. I became a believer.

The Annual Meeting for the whole denomination was to be held in North Manchester in May 1888. A wooded area known as Harter's Grove had been chosen for the conference site, and Father worked with other church men to set up tents for the kitchen, dining hall, and auditorium. A few days before the conference began, I walked with my sisters and the Miller girls into town to see the amazing transformation of the grove. The newspaper reported that ten thousand people would come to our little town of North Manchester, and it seemed to me that

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every last person in the town's population of 1,600 had been assigned some duty to prepare for such a large group. We girls got busy baking pies and ironing tablecloths for the dining hall.

I shall never forget my first experience of Annual Meeting under the tabernacle tent. After listening to the inspired preaching at the first service, I watched as Elder Quinter rose to lead the closing hymn and then began a prayer to close the service. The name of James Quinter from Pennsylvania was well-known in almost every Brethren household for it appeared each month as editor on the masthead of the church magazine, the Gospel Messenger. He said clearly, "We are glad to meet again," before his voice faltered and then silenced as he collapsed and died. It was a great shock to us all, but no more fitting memorial could have been devised for this guiding spirit. I was not the only young person there who vowed never to forget the voice of Quinter urging us to follow God's way of love and peace.

Alice stopped writing. Somehow peace eluded her at home, for despite her resolute vow each morning not to say an angry word, she usually broke it before breakfast. Even when she managed to curb her tongue all day, before the evening ended, she had given a scolding to Sarah and Phebe for some girlish lapse which brought them both to tears. Her mother would just shake her head. Well, if nothing else, perhaps this diary might be of use for self-correction. She would fill its pages with her mistakes and anger and do her best to learn how to control her feelings. But it was so much harder than learning from books.

In the spring of 1888 Bertha and I finished the grammar school course at Acme and came home with diplomas and a deep desire for more learning. We worried about what would happen next. So many farmers' children, intelligent and capable of further study, are put to work after grammar school. There are Brethren congregations all around who cling to the ideal of primitive rural life and reject

advanced schooling for their children out of fear that they will acquire the taint of society. But the Acme community sees the future a little differently, and many of the parents here don't think it a waste of money—or worse, a sin—to send a girl to secondary school. The schoolmaster, Mr. A. L. Ward, talked to Mother and Father about my abilities, and they agreed that I should continue my education at the high school in town despite the financial burden it placed on them. Father worked several extra jobs to save enough money for my tuition and Mother sold eggs to pay for my books and supplies.

In the summer I worked as housekeeper for the Esta Miller family. My carefree days had ended. Cooking and washing dishes, doing laundry, cleaning house, and taking care of children made me feel like an old drudge, but my mind was soon occupied again when I started high school in North Manchester. Bertha and I walked the two miles into town and back home in all kinds of weather. Sometimes a neighbor would stop his wagon and give us a ride part of the way.

In late September, the church celebrated communion with the traditional Brethren love feast, patterned after the Last Supper. Grandpa and Grandma attended the service with us and came to our house later and stayed the night. Little did I think the next morning when we said goodbye that when I saw my grandpa again, he would be cold in death, but three weeks later he passed away. My dear grandpa had gone to rest before we were ready to part, but my comfort came from knowing that his spirit had gone to its reward.

Grandma told me that one day just before he died Grandpa had asked her if I wasn't out in the kitchen; he thought he heard me talking. Now I wonder what he might have said to me if I had been there. I think it would have been a German joke.

Alice closed the book and slipped it quietly into the drawer of her small writing table next to her bed. She trusted Sarah and Phebe not to open the drawer – they had been warned – and eased into the bed she

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shared with her sisters. Sleep was beyond reach, however. Alice's fingers tingled from holding the pen for so long, or was it more like excitement, exhilaration even? She was seventeen and becoming a woman. One of the girls her age from church had just married – even the thought terrified her! Like a fledgling, as much as she wanted to soar, she feared leaving the nest. How would she know just when to spread her wings and where to fly?

Alice wished her eyes could bore through the darkness and see her future. She supposed she would marry too, some farmer's boy, and live a life all too familiar. Perhaps she might first teach for a year or two, earn a little money on her own. But try as she might, she could not see herself in the yard of a farmhouse with chickens squawking all around and a milk pail waiting to be filled. The brighter part of her mind's eye lay out beyond the farmhouse and the fields. It tantalized her until she fell asleep.

* * *

October 9, 1890

Alice blew her nose – again – and dared to touch her swollen throat. It hurt to swallow even the ginger tea she had brewed in hopes that it would ease her cold. Like the steady September rain in Indiana, she felt drippy and disagreeable. It was a most inconvenient time to be sick.

Still, she felt optimism. Her cold would fade away, the rain would cease, and autumn's glorious days were approaching. More importantly, she had survived the first week of teaching. Uncle Pete had been so good to vouch for her before the Pleasant Township School Board. She felt proud to carry on the tradition of the Grissos as teachers – Uncle Pete, Aunt Phebe, Uncle Martin, and now Alice, all employed in the township grammar schools.

Her boarding arrangements with Mr. Kelly's family suited her, especially when she discovered that they had a few minutes set aside before breakfast for morning worship. Alice missed the daily routine in her parents' house, but she had been much too busy this first week to feel homesick. This morning when she had unlocked the door to the little one-room schoolhouse – the Berry School as it was called – Alice stepped to the right to avoid the squeaky floorboard, just like she did at home. The wood stove had become hers to tend, and the floors to sweep with an old straw broom (she must ask for a better one).

All that she needed now was some insight into the behavior of the boys. Big and little, they challenged her every day with pranks and foolish talk. Her brother John, her best model for boyish behavior, had been gone from home for far too long to give her any tips. Yesterday, she had given most of the pupils black marks for misbehavior. One boy, Murry, was real naughty and provoked the others to misdeeds. She had nearly given up in discouragement, but a memory from her own grammar school days back at Acme resurfaced and made her determined that this must be a lesson from which she would learn, a test she would pass. Left in charge at Acme one afternoon while the teacher was in town on a pressing errand, Alice had lost complete control of the classroom and a few of the boys had nearly set the schoolhouse on fire. The next day the boys had come prepared for a whipping, a form of discipline common in many schools but never before used at Acme. When the teacher asked them to remove their coats, a second coat was revealed, on top of many layers of shirts and pants. Mr. Amber, the teacher, wisely decided to seat the boys next to the hot stove wearing all of their many layers of clothing. They never forgot the lesson.⁴

This task of teaching, thought Alice, was bigger than she ever imagined. She had read in *Parker's Talks on Teaching*⁵ about educating students to think for themselves in order to become

Chapter One

independent. That would be her standard, she decided, and her goal in whatever pathway she trod in life. For now, still sniffing, she ended her diary entry for the day with confident words.

I like teaching better than I ever thought I would.

Only One Alice



The King family, November 1887

Clockwise from top left: Sarah, John, Alice, Mary, Phebe, Daniel

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Three King girls, 1888
Left to right: Sarah, Alice, Phebe

Only One Alice



Acme School, drawn by F. U. Wagner, ca. 1890

CHAPTER TWO
“True Work is Worship”
1893, Mount Morris College, Illinois

February 1893

A pale winter sun poked past the bare tree branches and through the stately windows of the library, sending one thin beam to rest on a tall stack of books. Alice wished that the beam of light could bore a hole through the books to exactly the right phrase she needed for her commencement speech. Instead, it just energized the dust motes into a frenzy, reminding her of her own frenetic brain activity. She would graduate from Mount Morris Academy in just three months, then what? Alice did not want to think that she had reached the end of her education. She was thirsty for more. But her funds were nearly depleted, and she would need to find a paying job.

Graduation expenses were already accumulating. Just yesterday a notice had been delivered to her mailbox about the class picture to be taken in three weeks. Alice had surveyed her dresses hanging in the wardrobe. The light gray challis she liked the best had frayed along the hem and Alice spied a small rip in the skirt that needed repair. Her dark red poplin dress that she reserved for church had several faded spots. She supposed it was time to retire that one. A pretty blue muslin print had a rather large gravy stain on the sleeve. Possibly she could cover that with a sweater, but the plain truth was that she needed some new clothes. Would her meager finances stretch to cover the purchase of new dress fabric? And when would she find time to sew something in time for the picture?

Alice closed her books and put her winter coat on. It was time for a break. Reaching for her gloves in her pocket, she pulled out a folded envelope. It was a letter from her mother, forgotten in the rush to get

Only One Alice

her mail between classes this morning. She paused to read it. The letters were never long-winded, for her mother worked constantly at her chores at home, putting aside a few precious minutes each week to correspond with Alice in northern Illinois and John in southwestern Minnesota. This one, true to form, got right to the point.

Feb. 11th 1893

North Manchester Ind

Dear daughter

I will only write about little business we can only send you \$10 just now father had borrowed \$10 at the hardware store of Mr Frame and he had to pay that up and then we had to pay some at the book store for the girls you have \$31 and 90 cts yet you make this \$10 do as long as you can and when you want more soon we will try and get some out of the bank for you.

Do you want me to get some goods and make it up if you do I will try to do the best I can you have to measure your skirts and send the number of inches for there is no skirt here the right length I would have time to sew for you now

your loving mother, Mary King

Relief poured over her. Her dress dilemma seemed to have been solved. Mother could always be counted on for sewing help. Alice again considered her money situation and acknowledged that this \$10 would indeed be helpful in the short term. Her parents had stretched their resources beyond belief to help advance her education. It was possible that brother John sent them a little money when he could now that he was established in the printing trade. But their financial burdens

Chapter Two

were heavy, with Alice's college expenses and both Sarah and Phebe hoping to follow her lead and pursue more advanced education, Sarah in nurses' training and Phebe hoping for a normal school degree in education. Father's unpredictable wages as a farmhand and Mother's egg money could not stretch much further, even with an extremely frugal approach to household expenses. Their dream of securing a better future for their children could easily shatter.

Alice felt a light touch on her shoulder and turned to see her long-time friend Bertha Miller standing beside her, looking at the opened letter.

"Hard times at home, Alice?"

"Yes, and I don't know how to ease things for my folks. I don't want to quit school now. I'm nearly finished and then I want to go further. All my professors tell me I should consider college teaching."

"You should! And I may have a way for you to do that," cried out Bertha. The expected chorus of shushing sounds from other students accompanied her exclamation. "Professor Young just stopped me and said I should give you a message. He wants to see you in his office tomorrow morning."

Alice had enjoyed her courses with the college's leading Bible scholar, Professor E.S. Young, but what could this be about? Before her mind could pursue that question, Bertha was already giving her a hint. "He mentioned a large pile of work in his office that needs immediate attention. I think he wants to hire you!"

Alice dared to hope a little that night. She had already composed a letter to her mother in her mind. Working for Professor Young in his Bible Institute at Mount Morris would be a dream fulfilled, and just maybe a step on the road to college teaching.

She pictured herself as teacher back in the one-room country schools of Pleasant Township—first at Berry School and then at her dear old Acme School. The days had been pleasant ones, mostly, but

how dreary was the thought of teaching there forever. And what if she found someone to marry? Married women could not teach in the county schools of Indiana, and farmer's wife she would not be. Bertha's determination to attend college had opened Alice's mind to people and places and careers beyond Wabash County. Mount Morris College had turned out to be just what she needed.

At first, however, Alice had proposed that they both attend the Roanoke Classical Seminary which had just relocated to North Manchester. It would save money to live at home, and why not support the efforts of some local investors to encourage higher education? Bertha would not hear of it. "It's too new, Alice. We don't know if it's worth the tuition money!" Alice had to agree that the year-old school (established in 1889) had scant history to recommend it. "It's true that we have both been dreaming of living somewhere other than Manchester," Alice commented. Bertha replied, "Then Mount Morris it will be! The college has a good reputation, and I hear that some of the students are shaking things up in the church. We don't want to miss out, do we?" Alice wondered what her friend was talking about.

She had come of age in the midst of high tensions within the German Baptist Brethren Church that had led to a three-way schism a decade earlier, centered around disputes over Biblical authority, church governance and adaptation to the larger world. Those church members who clung to the old orders of plain dress, unaccompanied singing, free ministry, and limited exposure to broader cultural influences had separated and formed a church under the name of Old German Baptist Brethren (or "Old Orders"). In the remaining German Baptist Brethren Church change was coming, but slowly. Some had advocated for rapid reform and progressive ideas, such as Sunday Schools, salaried pastors, higher education and more activist publications. Impatient with the slow pace of reform, they too broke from the church and formed a new denomination, the Brethren Church,

in 1883. Back then the swirl of controversial ideas around twelve-year-old Alice had made a lasting impression, and she witnessed her local congregation in crisis as members left to join the Old Order group or the Progressive faction.

Now in her twenties, she regarded the anguished split and hard feelings within her church as instructive. Her pastor, R.H. Miller, had taught her much about leadership through his actions to promote understanding and respect for all opinions. His steady hand, along with other leaders in the remaining body of the German Baptist Brethren Church, nurtured a new spirit among Alice's generation. At Mount Morris College she had found a place with kindred spirits who sought more active engagement with church and society. Yes, a few of them were definitely shaking things up in the church.

Alice extinguished the gas lamp and pulled two quilts up snugly to her chin, then let her tired mind settle on a recent memory. She was sitting with her friend Anna Shull in a classroom. Classes had ended for the day, and they waited for a meeting of the Missionary Reading Circle to begin. Alice listened as other members talked with excitement about Bro. Wilbur Stover's application to become a missionary to India. "And the Missionary Committee approved it – with conditions!" "Yes, but then Bro. Wilbur did not go." "Well, he must be waiting for Mary Emmert to say yes to his proposal and become a missionary wife." "I heard that the Germantown church is eager for him to go and take his endless sermons on missions with him!" Alice drifted off on thoughts of dear Mary Emmert, and Bro. Wilbur with his passionate ideas of mission work in India, and of what it might be like to sail to India...

The next morning, after taking a bit of extra care to secure her long hair into a smooth bun and checking her boots for any stray bits of mud, she hurried to her appointment with Professor Young. His office door stood ajar. Seeing her shadow through the frosted glass, he called

out, “Please, do come in, Alice!” Though small in stature, Emanuel Sprankle Young filled whatever space he occupied. He gestured toward a chair for Alice to sit in, then swiveled toward a table behind his desk. Precarious stacks of books and papers, unopened envelopes and a chart of the Hebrew alphabet covered the table surface. “Alice, do you see this pile of work? My Institutes are getting the best of me!”

Professor Young had blazed a trail in the German Baptist Brethren Church by bringing Biblical literacy within reach of hundreds of members. His very first Bible Institute at Mount Morris in 1889 set a trend for Biblical education that continued for several years. He fervently believed that a more comprehensive study of the Bible would lead to better lives for his students, no matter their age, gender, or station in life. Now, however, he was pushing his limits of stamina and attention.

“How about it, Alice? Would you be interested in helping me out?”

Nothing had been said about wages. Alice looked at the table, then at her hands, and finally looked directly at her professor.

“Yes, Professor Young, I believe I can be of help to you. But...”

Before she could say another word, Professor Young said with a sly smile, “Oh, I’ll pay you handsomely. More than enough to cover your tuition and board for this semester. And you’ll earn every penny of it! When can you start?”

Hours later Alice walked back to her dormitory. Bertha would be full of questions.

* * *

A month later, Alice believed Professor Young’s joking prophecy about earning every penny of her pay. She kept up with her studies only by working late into the night. When she wasn’t in a classroom during the day she was sitting at the small table in the professor’s office, writing letters, preparing course outlines, and helping to grade

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tests. She had organized the stacks of folders and filed them and arranged the books on two bookcases in a logical sequence. But Alice knew that her greatest contribution had been her responses to Professor Young's brain-storming sessions. He often burst out with an idea for a new teaching method or a revised interpretation of biblical material. Alice had learned to listen carefully, wait patiently for the idea to develop, and then offer her own thoughts, whether positive or negative. At first, Professor Young was quite surprised when she voiced her opinion, but he nodded and pondered what she had said. The next time an idea began to percolate he paused and said to Alice, "I expect your considered response to my cockamamie rambling."

Now, however, it was Alice's turn to propose and her mentor to respond. "I have decided on a topic for my commencement exposition – True Work is Worship. What do you think?"

The professor rested his chin on his fists and closed his eyes for a moment. "'And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' [Colossians 3:17]. Yes, that is excellent. It rather fits with what you are doing just now."

Alice nodded while chuckling. "I thought you might see it that way, Professor."

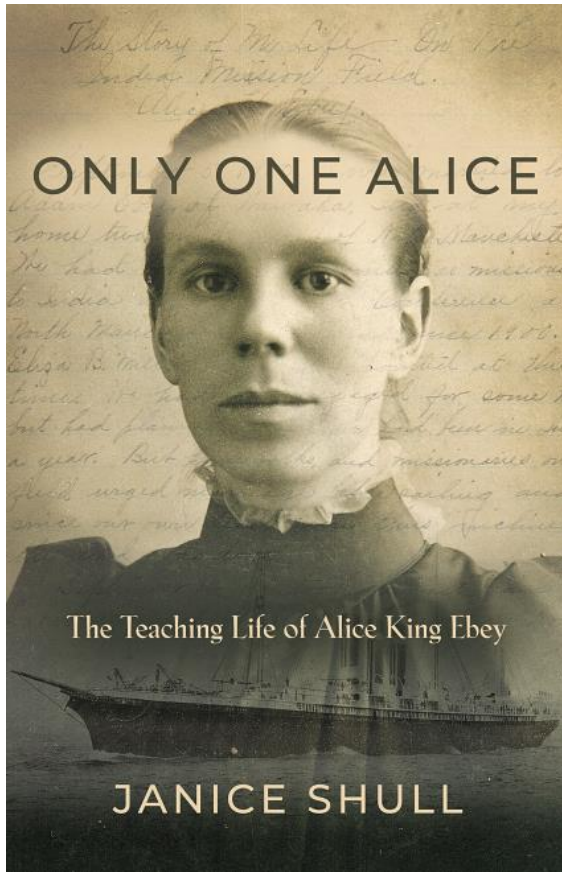
Only One Alice



Four friends, Mount Morris College, ca. 1892
left to right-Bertha Miller, Susie Forney, Alice King, Anna Shull



Mount Morris Academy graduates, 1893
Alice King, bottom row, center; D.L. Forney, bottom row, right;
Bertha Miller, middle row, second from left



Alice King Ebey lived and worked as a missionary teacher in India for over three decades. Her diaries and letters tell a story of grief and hardship a century ago, yet her life still teaches us of courage, compassion and hope for today.

Only One Alice: The Teaching Life of Alice King Ebey

By Janice Shull

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