by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

Albert A. Michelson of Virginia City, winner of the 1907 Nobel Prize in Physics

A myth surrounds the childhood schooling of Albert Abraham Michelson (1852-1931). Michelson grew up to become a preeminent scientist specializing in the properties of light. He won the distinguished Nobel Prize in physics in 1907, the first American to win the coveted award. The story goes that Michelson attended the Fourth Ward School in Virginia City before pursuing his studies at the U.S. Naval Academy. Let's shed some light on the facts.

Michelson was born in Strelno, a small Prussian village on December 19, 1852. The Jewish family, in search of greater freedom and opportunity, immigrated to the United States in 1854. After a brief time in New York, the family relocated to San Francisco and then moved to the Mother Lode country. At fourteen, young Albert arrived on the Comstock from Murphy's Camp, Calaveras County, with his father, Samuel, mother, Rosalie, and five siblings. On September 4, 1867, Samuel Michelson purchased a residence at 37 North F Street. Samuel soon opened a dry goods business at 24 South C Street.

In 1870, Albert Michelson graduated high school at the age of seventeen. Historian Phil Earl in his "This Was Nevada" article describing the career of Michelson noted that he took an examination for a Congressional appointment to the U. S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland. He tied with another aspirant, and lost the appointment because of some political maneuvering on behalf of his competitor. "Undaunted, he got a letter of recommendation from Congressman Thomas Fitch and set off to Washington, D. C. to try and get one of the ten appointments at large from President Grant," Earl wrote. "He talked with Grant but the appointments had already been made. Going on to the Academy, he so impressed the Commandant with his earnestness that a place was made for him at the school as the eleventh appointment."

Michelson graduated from the Naval Academy on May 31, 1873, ninth in a class of twenty-nine. He completed two years of naval service in the West Indies, and then was appointed an instructor in physics and chemistry, a position he held until 1879.

Meanwhile, back in Virginia City, his father had purchased a house on June 22, 1872 at 17 North A Street and relocated the growing family from the F Street residence. At the same time, "The Queen of the Comstock" was still booming. Despite a disastrous fire in October 1875 that burned much of the city, and a downturn in the gold and silver mining economy, a new school, the Fourth Ward School, opened in 1876.

If one does the math, when the Fourth Ward School opened for its first students, Professor Michelson was teaching students of his own at the Naval Academy. He never attended the Fourth Ward because he was a twenty-three year old college instructor living in Annapolis, Maryland.

The rest is history. Albert Michelson taught at a number of different universities, principally at the University of Chicago, before his death in 1931. The Nobel Prize was awarded to Michelson for his work in spectroscopic and meteorological investigations. According to Phil Earl, "his work with light was later to become part of a new philosophy of science which reached its highest development in Albert Einstein's theory of relativity."

For more information, see Phil Earl's "Albert A. Michelson: Nevada Nobel Laureate" in *This Was Nevada*
(Reno: Nevada Historical Society, 1986), pp. 92-95.

Photo: Albert A. Michelson of Virginia City, winner of the 1907 Nobel Prize in physics. Courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society

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