

## “...To Get A Little More Learning” Prudence Crandall’s Female Boarding School

In 1830, the town of Canterbury, in northeastern Connecticut’s Windham County, was a thriving community of some 2,500 residents, including 69 blacks. Socially, early-19th-century Canterbury, as with other New England towns, had a superficial harmony—if not equality—between the races. Town businesses were frequented by both blacks and whites. Both worshiped in the same churches—though blacks were relegated to sitting in the rear pews or upper galleries. Though the majority of adults did not mix socially, their children sat side by side in the district schools.

By then, industrialization was changing the face of the area, with more than a dozen mills operating in the town and many successful families residing in Canterbury. In the summer of 1831, these residents asked Prudence Crandall, aged 28 and a graduate of the Friends’ Boarding School in Providence, to open a private academy within their community to instruct young women. In the fall of 1831, Crandall purchased the Luther Paine house, a 16-room Georgian home located on the Canterbury Green, and opened her academy, with the community’s complete support and encouragement.

In opening her academy, Prudence Crandall joined the ranks of countless women who opened female seminaries during the late-18th and early-19th centuries in order to provide education to

young women, to broaden their understanding, and to prepare them for suitable intellectual and social positions. Such also were the goals of Catherine Beecher, who opened the Hartford Female Seminary in 1823. Crandall was no doubt familiar with the education Beecher’s school offered.

The community had only positive and supportive comments to describe Crandall and her academy during the spring and summer of 1832. The school’s Board of Visitors stated that they “... recommend to the public patronage of Miss Crandall’s school, and cheerfully add that she has already acquired a high reputation as an instructor and the assiduity and attention which she devotes to the health and morals of her pupils renders her school a suitable place for education.” Such positive public comments came to a dramatic end in November 1832, when Sarah Harris, a 20-year-old free black resident of Canterbury, asked to become a student at the Canterbury Female Boarding School. Her parents, William and Sally Prentice Harris, had recently moved there from nearby Norwich, Connecticut, where Harris had attended school. As difficult as it was for white children to receive an adequate education, Connecticut’s free black students faced additional problems in the state’s public schools because of discrimination by white teachers. Wanting to return to the black community of Norwich as a teacher someday, Sarah Harris approached Crandall sometime in November 1832 and informed her that she “wanted to get a little more learning.”

Crandall was not naive concerning the implications to granting Harris’ request and knew there would be opposition to it. She believed that if she kept Harris’ mind in bondage when she could free it, she was no better than a slaveholder herself. Her Quaker upbringing had also taught her not to fight with those who were wrong, but to come to the aid of those who were oppressed. Sarah Harris was admitted to the Academy.

Within days, many parents threatened that if Harris were not dismissed they would withdraw their children. With great care, Crandall weighed her options, knowing she could never dismiss Harris. The solution soon became clear. She needed to contact other black families who might

*The Prudence Crandall House Museum, a National Historic Landmark, is located in the rural community of Canterbury, Connecticut, along Route 169 (a National Scenic Byway). Photo by Drew Hartly.*



be interested in sending their daughters to the school. The one person who could help her make these contacts was William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*, a Boston abolitionist newspaper. On April 1, 1833, after conferring with Garrison and other abolitionists, Prudence Crandall reopened the academy for the purpose of instructing “young ladies and little misses of color,” using a curriculum identical to that used for white students, and thus establishing the first academy for young black women in New England.

Crandall’s actions directly challenged Catherine Beecher’s so-called “Natural Order,” a then popular theory of separate spheres for the sexes which held that the goodness of women in the home somehow legitimized men’s aggressive behavior in their world.

Over the next few months, the new students, who ranged in age from 10 to their late

*Hand painted pearlware bowl, circa 1805, recovered from archaeological excavations at the Crandall House. This artifact was featured on Connecticut’s 1993 Archaeology Awareness Week poster. Photo by Drew Harty.*



teenage years, began arriving. They came from New York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island to Crandall’s academy.

As the new academy was organizing, so were the enraged residents of Canterbury. Andrew T. Judson, a lawyer and former Secretary of the Board of Visitors of the Canterbury Female Boarding Academy, quickly organized and circulated petitions in 16 Connecticut towns stating that the introduction of people into Connecticut from other states was an “evil of great magnitude” and “a calamity that would greatly increase upon the people the burdens of Pauperism.” On April 30, the petitions and their 903 signatures were delivered to the state legislature. Three weeks later, it enacted the so-called “Black Law,” making it illegal to bring blacks into Connecticut to educate them or to operate a school for that purpose without first receiving the town’s permission. In restricting their right to free movement and choice of residence, the Black Law implied that blacks were not citizens. (The Black Law was repealed in 1838. Blacks were not recognized as citizens in

Connecticut until 1865, and not nationally until 1866.)

A month later, Prudence Crandall was arrested and charged with breaking the state’s Black Law. Using a strategy of publicly embarrassing Andrew Judson and his supporters by forcing them to jail her, she willingly spent a night incarcerated. The tactic proved successful as news of her arrest spread quickly. Though local papers criticized her actions and warned that she had “stepped out of the hallowed precincts of female propriety, and now stood on common ground,” many people were more supportive. At her Academy, the atmosphere remained cheerful and supportive, as one student wrote, “Love and union seem to bind our little circle in the bonds of sisterly affection.”

Crandall tried to shield her students from the racism and bigotry of the local communities. One student wrote “that she took her utmost care to persuade us not to indulge in any angry feelings towards our adversaries.” But harassment took many forms. The Academy was pelted with rocks, eggs, and mud. Students outside the Academy building attracted jeering and catcalling. Manure was poured down the well to foul the water. Only one of the town’s shopkeepers would sell supplies to Crandall. Dr. Andrew Harris, a physician who lived across the street, refused to treat any of the building’s inhabitants.

Prudence Crandall’s first trial, on August 22, 1833, ended in a hung jury. A second trial, in October 1833, was presided over by Judge David Daggett from New Haven, Connecticut. Daggett had worked tirelessly in 1831 to stop a black college from opening in that city and, obviously, had very definite opinions on the constitutionality of the Black Law. This time Prudence Crandall was found guilty; primarily, because of Judge Daggett’s charge to the jury in which he declared that blacks were not citizens of the United States. He argued that since blacks were not citizens, the Constitution didn’t entitle them to the freedom of education. The defense immediately filed an appeal.

In January 1834, while Crandall waited for the third trial to begin, the Canterbury Female Boarding School building was set on fire. Frederick Olney, a black handyman who happened to be in the building that afternoon, was ironically charged with the arson. He was put on trial in March; but after only 15 minutes of deliberation, the jury found him not guilty.

The third trial took place at the Court of Errors on July 26, 1834. Crandall’s lawyer argued that her students were not foreigners or aliens and posed no threat to anyone. As human beings born in the United States, they owed the state of

Connecticut the same obligations white citizens had. If allegiance was expected from the black population, then they, in turn, should expect the state's protection. "He, a colored person, is not a citizen to obey, and an alien to demand protection." Judge Thomas Williams rendered the final decision, reversing the lower court's ruling on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

Both sides were disappointed. The abolitionists had hoped to take the case to the Supreme Court to finally resolve the question of black citizenship. Their opponents had hoped the courts would finally put an end to the school.

On the night of September 9, 1834, a mob took the law into their own hands and attacked the Academy building. They beat the walls and doors with lead pipes and clubs and smashed more than 90 panes of glass. The school's neighbors did nothing, and the local sheriff informed the inhabitants he could give them no protection.

Samuel J. May, a Unitarian minister from Brooklyn, Connecticut, and a staunch supporter of Prudence Crandall throughout the turmoil, subsequently informed the students that the academy would close because of the threat of additional violence. "The words almost blistered my lips," he wrote in his memoirs, "My heart glowed with indignation. I felt ashamed for Canterbury, ashamed of Connecticut, ashamed of my country." The noble endeavor was over.

*At the Annual Tea with Prudence Crandall, Donna Dufresne engages the public with her monologue "Voice of Conviction—the Passions of Prudence Crandall." A reproduction oil painting of Prudence Crandall hangs in the front hallway at the museum.*



Though Prudence Crandall Philleo (she married Calvin Philleo in 1834) left Canterbury soon after the Academy closed, she taught throughout her life. In 1848, she left New England for the Midwest, living first in Illinois and later in Kansas. By the 1880s, as attitudes toward blacks had begun to change somewhat, Prudence Crandall and her school were seen in a new light. In 1885, a group of distinguished Hartford area residents, (including Mark Twain) wrote her. Petitions were once again distributed throughout the state in an effort to pass legislation to award her an annuity. On April 22, 1886, 56 years (almost to the day) after her Academy for black girls opened, the Connecticut legislature awarded her the sum of \$400 per year, its way of making amends for the actions taken against her so many years before. Prudence Crandall Philleo received the annuity until her death in 1890.

Though Prudence Crandall's female academy lasted only a relatively short period of time, the courage and tolerance she and her students displayed remain without equal in the history of education in New England. The personalities, both famous and unknown, that her academy drew together changed the direction of education in this country; and the legal decisions from her trials affected constitutional law. "The arguments of Prudence Crandall's lawyers, William Ellsworth and Henry Goddard, were resurrected 120 years later, in 1953, when Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, used them while arguing the landmark school desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Strane 1991).

In 1969, Connecticut took action to ensure that the work and courage of this female educator and her students would never be forgotten. The Connecticut Historical Commission acquired the building and began its restoration, rehabilitation, and interpretation—although fiscal austerity delayed the museum's public opening and ceremonial dedication until May 1984. The Historical Commission's curatorial and archeological staff have collaborated on archival and archeological research. Archeological investigations provided important knowledge of the house's original drainage system. Subsequent plantings had blocked this architectural feature, resulting in the development of a long-term moisture problem—the "root cause" of significant structural decay. Field studies also provided insights regarding historic use of yard spaces, trash disposal, and privy location. Excavations yielded tangible evidence of the community's assault on the academy—large quantities of shattered window glass were unearthed around the perimeter of the structure.

Archeological monitoring of the restoration of the Crandall House revealed a severely charred front girt and floor joists—dramatic evidence of the arson attempt of January 1834.



Extensive restoration efforts joined with the archeological study of the house's architectural fabric. The removal of upstairs flooring revealed dramatic confirmation of the extent of fire-related damage to the structure. Small-scale artifacts that were recovered beneath floor boards, including straight pins, buttons, and decorative beads, provide glimpses into students' personal lives.

A year-long exhibit, *More Than Meets the Eye—Historical Archaeology at the Prudence Crandall House*, showed the site's extensive archeological assemblage of 19th-century ceramics and personal items and provided the public with an evocative window to Prudence Crandall and her students. Recently, the Connecticut Historical Commission and the Office of the State Archaeologist unveiled *Surrounded by the Past: Uncovering Connecticut's Archaeological Heritage*, a new traveling exhibit on the state's diverse archeological heritage.

The Prudence Crandall House also has offered programs, exhibitions, and special events developed by elaborating on the broad themes that reflect the site's interpretation: women and minority history, local community history, the history of American education and female education, the

beginnings of the antislavery and women's rights causes. The museum's small, but impressive research library includes publications, papers, and documents on these topics.

The museum also offers a special opportunity when hosting school field trips since the Prudence Crandall Academy's history—including incidents of bigotry, racism, and intolerance—allows teachers and students to discuss these disquieting topics in a non-threatening environment. With many schools experiencing racially motivated incidents, some teachers are using an educational visit to the Crandall Museum as a way to openly discuss students' feelings and attitudes, while at the same time clarifying historical and contemporary racial misconceptions.

In 1991, the Prudence Crandall House was designated a National Historic Landmark honoring the lifetime achievements of this female champion of human rights and the courage and determination of her students. In October 1995, Connecticut Governor John Rowland further honored Prudence Crandall by designating her as the state's Female Hero.

#### Suggested Readings

*Prudence Crandall: A Biography*, Marvis Olive Welch, Jason Publishers, Manchester, CT, 1984.

*A Whole-Souled Woman*, Susan Strane, Norton Press, NY, 1991.

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Sarah Harris Fayerweather (April 16, 1812–November 16, 1878) Hoping to one day become a teacher in the black community of Norwich, CT, her place of birth, Sarah approached Prudence Crandall in the fall of 1832 and informed her that she "...wanted to get a little more learning." If Prudence admitted her, she would forever be obliged, "...but if such action might be a means of injury, she would not insist upon the favor."

On November 28, 1832, Sarah married George Fayerweather, a blacksmith. In 1855, she and George joined his brothers in Kingston, RI. The brothers established a respected blacksmithing business in Kingston and became a major part of the town's business community. Over the years, the Fayerweather home became a center of anti-slavery activity. Sarah entertained many of the notable activists, including Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison. The Garrisons and Fayerweathers remained friends for many years. It was a custom for Sarah to send the Garrisons a cake for the holidays.

Photo from the collection of the Prudence Crandall Museum, Canterbury, CT, administered by the Connecticut Historical Commission.