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Connecticut's Canterbury Tale: Prudence Crandall and Her School

BENJAMIN SEVITCH

This is the story about a brave woman who tried to establish a school for black girls in a small town in Connecticut. For her troubles she was confronted with bigotry, slander, incarceration, violence, and finally, arson. After months of living in daily fear, she was driven from her home with a sense of personal failure. In short, it is a story typical of the tribulations encountered by many who were sympathetic to the Abolitionist movement in early nineteenth-century America, when bigotry and violence were hardly behavioral aberrations.¹ What is perhaps not typical is the courage that this woman demonstrated in the face of the forces mounted against her.

Prudence Crandall was born on September 3, 1803, in Hopkinton, Rhode Island, to Quaker parents (Adams 503). Ten years later the family sold their property and settled on a farm in Canterbury, Connecticut, about ten miles west of the Rhode Island border. After attending the Friends' School at Providence for four years, Prudence taught school in Plainfield, the next town four miles east of Canterbury, where she immediately became popular with students and parents alike (May 40).

Canterbury was a thriving community in the eighteen-thirties. With a population of almost fifteen hundred, the town stood on a rise of land near the Quinebaug River and provided a major transportation center through which the Hartford and Providence road intersected the Norwich and Worcester turnpike (Kimball 2). Farmers and businessmen prospered, and Canterbury boasted the largest Temperance Society in Windham County (Larned 484-90). All that was lacking was a school for the young ladies of the community. To meet that need, a group of the more substantial citizens asked Prudence Crandall to establish such a school. Advancing her money to purchase a large house on the Canterbury Green which had been left vacant by the death of a prominent lawyer, these people became the school's "Board of Visitors," what today we would recognize as trustees. They included State Attorney Andrew T. Judson; Dr. Andrew Harris, physician and surgeon, whose wife was the daughter of General Moses Cleveland, a native of Canterbury, for whom Cleveland, Ohio, is named; Esquire Daniel Frost, President of the county Temperance Society; Justice of the Peace Rufus Adams; and the Reverend Dennis Platt, pastor of the Congregational Church (Larned 490-91).

And so in November of 1831, Prudence Crandall, a twenty-eight-year-old Quaker spinster schoolmistress, opened her school, which soon was populated by girls from the best families in Canterbury as well as from neighboring towns (Kimball 3). For the next year the school flourished and its teacher was held in unimpeachable repute. What happened to change this idyllic scenario is best described in a letter written by Prudence many years later to the historian of Windham County:

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I had a nice colored girl, now Mrs. Charles Harris, as help in my family; and her intended husband regularly received *The Liberator* [William Lloyd Garrison's radical Abolitionist newspaper, published in Boston]. The girl took the paper from the office and loaned it to me. In that the condition of the colored people both slaves and free was truthfully portrayed, the double-dealing and manifest deception of the Colonization Society were faithfully exposed, and the question of Immediate Emancipation of the million of slaves in the United States boldly advocated. Having been taught from early childhood the sin of Slavery, my sympathies were greatly aroused. Sarah Harris, a respectable young woman and a member of the church (now Mrs. Fairweather, and sister to the before-named intended husband), called often to see her friend Marcia, my family assistant. In some of her calls I ascertained that she wished to attend my school and board at her own father's house at some little distance from the village. I allowed her to enter as one of my pupils. By this act I gave great offence. The wife of an Episcopal clergyman who lived in the village told me that if I continued that colored girl in my school it could not be sustained. I replied to her, *That it might sink, then, for I shall not turn her out!* I very soon found that some of my school would not leave to return if the colored girl was retained. Under these circumstances I made up my mind that if it were possible I would teach colored girls exclusively (qtd. in Larned 491).

It was not surprising that Prudence Crandall, with her Quaker upbringing, should embrace the Abolitionist cause. The Friends had always been vigorous opponents of slavery. John Woolman, Lucretia Mott, and John Greeneaf Whittier are only a few of the many who preached and practised the equality of man. But the equality of man was not the principal concern of the parents of Canterbury. They came to Prudence and demanded that Sarah Harris be expelled immediately because they "would not have it said their daughters went to school with a nigger girl" (qtd. in Kimball 3). Rather than yield to the local pressure, Prudence, wrote to Garrison in January, 1833, and visited him in Boston later in the month. In February parents and pupils were informed that the Canterbury Female Boarding School would be closed until the first Monday in April, when it would reopen for "young ladies and little misses of color" (May 42). To guarantee that there would be enough black students to warrant the continuance of the school, Miss Crandall placed an advertisement in *The Liberator* on March 2 (Garrison 782).

By this time Canterbury was thoroughly aroused with Prudence Crandall's intentions. A committee of the Board of Visitors called on her to dissuade her from her venture. Esquire Frost, spokesman for the group, labored to convince her of the impropriety of her idea and delicately hinted at the danger that might ensue from "these leveling principles and intermarriage between the whites and blacks." Prudence answered that "Moses had a black wife," which effectively ended the conversation (qtd. in Larned 492).

When private persuasion failed, public action was tried. In characteristically New England fashion a town meeting was called for March 9 to devise some scheme for escaping the crushing calamity of a "school for nigger girls" (Larned 492). News of the Canterbury school had now reached the Reverend Samuel J. May, a Unitarian clergyman and Abolitionist who lived in Brooklyn, Connecticut, just six miles north of Canterbury. May had written Crandall offering his support, and, on March 4, Prudence replied asking May to act as her attorney. He accepted and came to the meeting with his Abolitionist friend, George W. Benson. The day before the meeting Prudence learned that Arnold Buffum, a fellow Quaker and the principal lecturing agent of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, was in Norwich, Connecticut. She visited Buffum and persuaded him to come to Canterbury the next night.

Attorney Asael Bacon moderated the town meeting which packed a thousand persons into the Congregational Church on the Green. Speaker after speaker slandered Prudence Crandall and her supporters in abusive language describing her undertaking "as a plot against the peace and prosperity of the village" (qtd. in Kimball 5). Judge Adams introduced one of many resolutions that declared that "the locality of a school for the people of color at any place within the limits of this town, for the admission of persons of foreign jurisdiction, meets with our unqualified disapprobation, and it is to be understood, that the inhabitants of Canterbury protest against it in the most earnest manner" (qtd. in Larned 493). State Attorney Judson, whose house on Canterbury Green stood next to Miss Crandall's then continued the attack. The idea of having "a school of nigger girls so near him was insupportable" (qtd. in May 45). By this time Buffum and May thought it was appropriate for someone to speak on Prudence's behalf. Then they passed her powers of attorney over to Judson, who, according to May,

instantly broke forth with greater violence than before; accused us of insulting the town by coming there to interfere with its local concerns. Other gentlemen sprang to their feet in hot displeasure; poured out their tirades upon Miss Crandall and her accomplices, and, with fists doubled in our faces, roughly admonished us that if we opened our lips there, they would inflict upon us the utmost penalty of the law, if not a more immediate vengeance (45).

The moderator ruled that they could not address the meeting and warned them that they would be prosecuted if they tried to do so. The resolutions were passed; the meeting was adjourned. May stood up in his pew and cried out, "Men of Canterbury, I have a word for you. Hear me!" After briefly rebutting the vicious attacks against Prudence, he yielded the floor to Buffum, but very quickly the trustees of the church appeared and ordered everyone out of the sanctuary (May 46).

By now Prudence Crandall had become a *cause celebre* in Abolitionist circles. Garrison wrote: "Miss Crandall must be sustained at all hazards. . . . In Boston, we are all excited at the Canterbury affair" (782). The Reverend Simeon Jocelyn of New Haven reported to Garrison: "We are all determined to sustain Miss Crandall if there is law in the land enough to protect her. . . . She is a noble soul and has no doubt more praying friends in the United States drawn to her by her persecution than the whole number of the population in Canterbury" (qtd. in Garrison and Garrison 1:340).

When Prudence reopened her school the battle lines were clearly established, but the townsfolk now shifted their strategy. Early in its history Canterbury had passed a law against vagrants. Any person warned to leave town by the selectmen must either post a bond guaranteeing that he would not become a burden upon the town or else be subject to a fine of \$1.67 for each week that he remained. If at the end of the ten days the vagrant had neither paid the fine nor left town, the whipping post was to be invoked: he was to be stripped to the waist and whipped on the naked back not to exceed ten strokes (May 51).

This harsh old law was suddenly revived. On the day after her arrival one of the pupils, Eliza Hammond, a sixteen-year-old girl from Providence, was warned to leave town. Eliza refused to pay the fine and declared that she would rather take the whipping than give in. Fortunately May posted a \$10,000 bond, which easily protected all the students, and the first victory in the struggle went to Prudence Crandall, but not for long (May 51).

After a second town meeting on April 1, Canterbury petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly to adopt a law forbidding schools to admit Negroes from outside the state. Prudence Crandall's school had now become a matter of concern for the entire state. Connecticut's infamous "Black Law" was passed by the Senate and House of Representatives and signed by the Governor on May 24, 1833. It declared that "no person shall set up or establish in this State any school, academy, or literary institution for the instruction or education of colored persons who are not inhabitants of this State," and the law established a schedule of stiff fines for violations (Larned 496). Church bells rang in Canterbury and a cannon was fired to signal the town's victory.

Prudence Crandall's father was sent a letter threatening him and the other members of his family with a fine of \$100 if they should attempt to visit her. Miss Crandall, the epistle said, would "be taken up the same way as for stealing a horse or burglarizing. Her property will not be taken but she will be put in jail, not having the liberty of the yard. There is no mercy to be shown about it" (Larned 497). On June 27, the sheriff appeared at the school with a warrant for the principal's arrest. Prudence was escorted to the local court where Justice Adams presided. The arraignment did not take long. She was committed to stand trial at the August session of the Superior Court. Bond was established at \$300, but, to the surprise of everyone, no one posted it. The Justice demanded that a messenger be dispatched to the Reverend May informing him that unless he provided the requisite surety, Prudence would be jailed. May denied the request but travelled immediately to the site of the local jail in Brooklyn. When the jailer arrived with Prudence in town, May told her: "If now you hesitate, if you dread the gloomy place so much as to wish to be saved from it, I will give bonds for you even now." "Oh no," she promptly replied, "I am only afraid they will not put me in jail" (qtd. in May 55).

May's refusal to post bond and Prudence's willingness to go to jail were designed to attract popular sympathy to their cause. The jail was small and not much used. Everyone knew that two years earlier it had been occupied by a condemned murderer, one Oliver Watkins, who had strangled his wife with a whipcord, and was taken from the Brooklyn jail to his hanging (McCain 128). Recognizing the trap before them, two of Prudence's adversaries beseeched May one final time: "It would be a damn shame, an eternal disgrace to the State, to have her put into jail, - into the very room that Watkins had last occupied." "Certainly, gentlemen, and you may prevent this, if you please," May replied. But they protested, "We are not her friends; we are not in favor of her school: we don't want any more damn niggers coming among us. It is your place to stand by Miss Crandall and help her now." "She knows we have not deserted her," May responded; and the very next day bond was posted and Prudence released (qtd. in May 55-57).

But now the campaign of public persecution escalated. Whenever she and her pupils went for a walk, a crowd of noisy hoodlums trailed along behind, hooting, jeering, and blowing tin horns. Her house was splattered with rotten eggs. Her students were never certain when stones would be thrown at them, day or night. The local merchants signed an agreement not to fill her orders. Doctor Harris refused to call at the house. The trustess of the Congregational Church declined to seat her pupils. Someone threw a shovelful of manure into her well and no one would supply her with fresh water (Garrison and Garrison 1:321). Everything seemed to be going against Prudence Crandall.

But the citizens of Canterbury had underestimated the recalcitrance of their school-

mistress. Prudence met each situation as it arose with ingenuity. She found a sympathetic storekeeper in the nearby village of Packerville and a friendly Negro in Norwich. The black man volunteered to bring her supplies from the grocer and to transport her pupils back and forth from the school. When the doors of the Congregational Church were closed to her students, she found that they were welcome to attend Baptist services in Packerville (Larned 496, 500). The water problem was more difficult to solve. She had only one well, and when it became polluted it looked like the school might be forced to close. But her father came to the rescue by ignoring the threats made against him. Each day he carried a few pails of water from his house to the school.

The Reverend Samuel May, in the meantime, was busily preparing for the upcoming trial of Prudence Crandall. He contacted Arthur Tappan, a wealthy New York City merchant who frequently contributed to Abolitionist and Temperance causes. Tappan, who had been following the Crandall case in the pages of *The Liberator*, instructed May by letter that:

This contest, in which you have been providentially called to engage, will be a serious, perhaps a violent one. It may be prolonged and very expensive. Nevertheless, it ought to be persisted in to the last. . . . Consider me your banker. Spare no necessary expense. Command the services of the ablest lawyers. See to it that this great case shall be thoroughly tried, cost what it may. I will cheerfully honor your drafts to enable you to defray that cost (qtd. in May 58).

A few weeks later the philanthropist appeared unannounced at May's doorstep to prepare for Prudence's defense. Tappan possessed an almost twentieth-century appreciation of publicity as he told May: "You are almost helpless without the press. You must issue a paper, publish it largely, and send it to all the principal newspapers throughout the country" (qtd. in May 61). They travelled to Plainfield, where Miss Crandall had begun her teaching career, and purchased a printing shop that had recently gone out of business. Then they engaged a promising twenty-three-year-old law student, Charles C. Burleigh, to edit a weekly paper devoted to supporting Prudence Crandall, Abolitionism, and Temperance. *The Unionist* started publication on July 25, 1833, and ran for almost two years (May 64).

The trial of Prudence Crandall for the crime of operating a boarding school for colored girls began on August 23, 1833, at the Windham County Courthouse in Brooklyn. Acting on the advice of Arthur Tappan, May had hired three distinguished members of the state bar, William Wolcott Ellsworth, Calvin Goddard, and Henry Strong. Ellsworth headed the team. He currently served as a United States Congressman from Connecticut; and his father, Oliver Ellsworth, had been the second Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Three prosecutors, led by Andrew T. Judson, provided the opposition.

The prosecution began by introducing evidence to establish the fact that the school did exist and that Prudence Crandall did indeed instruct certain colored girls who were not inhabitants of Connecticut. Over the objections of the defense, some of the students were called to the stand. After presenting fourteen witnesses, including pupils, friends, and relatives of Prudence, Judson rested his case.

The defense began by conceding that Prudence had broken the Black Law. Their case relied on the argument that the law was unconstitutional. Ellsworth claimed that free Negroes were citizens and therefore enjoyed the same essential rights, such as those to free movement and education, that they enjoyed in the states from which they came.

Judson countered by denying that colored persons were citizens of those states where they were not enfranchised. In fact, he argued, if it were not for the protection provided by current law, the Southern states might free all their slaves and send them to Connecticut, which probably made a sobering impression upon some of the jurors. In his charge to the jury, Judge Joseph Eaton ruled that "the law was constitutional and obligatory on the people of the State." After being out for several hours, the jury returned without a verdict. Eaton gave further instructions, but the jury returned again and announced that it was hopelessly deadlocked. Seven of them were for conviction, and five for acquittal (May 68-69).

Under normal procedure the hung jury would have meant an automatic continuance of Prudence's case until the next term of the County Court, scheduled for December, 1833. But in October, Chief Justice David Daggett of the Supreme Court of Errors was sitting as the trial judge of the Superior Court at Brooklyn. Daggett was a former mayor of New Haven who, according to Reverend May, "was known to be hostile to the colored people, and a strenuous advocate of the Black Law" (69). The prosecutors were confident of obtaining a conviction with Daggett on the bench, and they successfully moved the Crandall case to the Superior Court docket. The second trial opened on October 3, 1833, with the opposing legal teams intact. The evidence and arguments were essentially the same as before.

Judge Daggett's charge to the jury left no doubt about the verdict they would return:

The persons contemplated in this act are *not citizens* within the obvious meaning of the constitution of the *United States*, which I have just read. Let me begin, by putting this plain question. Are *slaves citizens*? At the adoption of the constitution of the *United States*, every state was a slave state. . . . We all know, that slavery is recognized in that constitution as it is; and it is the duty of this court to take that constitution as it is, for we have sworn to support it. . . .

Are *free blacks* citizens? . . . I think Chancellor *Kent*, whose authority it gives me pleasure to quote,² determines this question, by fair implication. Had this authority considered free blacks citizens, he had ample opportunity to say so. But what he has said excludes that idea: 'In most of the *United States*, there is a distinction in respect to political privileges, between free white persons and free coloured persons of *African* blood; and in no part of the country do the latter, in point of fact, participate equally with the whites, in the exercise of civil and political rights. The *African* race are essentially a degraded caste, of inferior rank and condition in society. Marriages are forbidden between them and whites in some of the states, and when not absolutely contrary to the law, they are revolting, and regarded as an offence against public decorum. . . .

To my mind, it would be a perversion of terms, and the well known rule of construction, to say, that slaves, free blacks, or *Indians*, were citizens, within the meaning of that term, as used in the constitution. God forbid that I should add to the degradation of this race of men; but I am bound by my duty, to say, they are not citizens.³

As if his instructions were not specific enough to permit only one possible verdict, Daggett added his opinion that even if free blacks were citizens, then Connecticut's Black Law would still be constitutional, because education was only a privilege and the legislature could regulate schools in any way as long as it did not offend the United States Constitution. The jury returned a verdict of guilty, and Prudence Crandall's lawyers filed an immediate appeal to the Supreme Court of Errors.

Despite the ordeals of two trials and the disapprobation of her neighbors, Prudence continued to operate her school. William Lloyd Garrison, whose involvement in the

Prudence Crandall affair directly led to his marriage, in 1834, to the daughter of George Benson, with Reverend Samuel May officiating, used *The Liberator* to urge all colored parents who could afford it to send their daughters to Canterbury. He assured them that their children would be well cared for and properly instructed. The attendance had increased from fourteen to seventeen students, and two new teachers had been added to the faculty: Miss Crandall's younger sister, Almira, and William H. Burleigh, brother of the editor of *The Unionist* (Larned 499).

On July 22, 1834, the case of *Crandall v. The State of Connecticut* was heard before the Supreme Court at Hartford. Ellsworth and Goddard represented Prudence for the third time, but now Windham County attorney Chauncey F. Cleveland joined Judson on the state's behalf. Ellsworth again argued that the Black Law was unconstitutional because:

That the coloured persons mentioned in the information, are *citizens* of their respective states. If they were white, it is conceded they would be. The point turns, then, upon a distinction in *colour* only. This distinction, as the basis of fundamental rights, is, in the first place, novel. It is not recognized, by the common law of England, or the principles of the British constitution; by our own declaration of independence; or by the constitution of Connecticut (*Crandall v. The State*, 10 CONN 348).

Judson and Cleveland countered the argument directly. They asserted that it was not novel that citizenship rested on skin color and cited Indians as an example. Moreover, they cited various laws that had defined citizens as free white persons. Their final point concerned the right of the state to regulate education and to control the influx of outsiders.

Both sides obviously sought a determination of the constitutionality of Connecticut's Black Law. Instead, the case was adjudicated on a technicality. Justice Thomas Scott Williams, writing for the Court, held that Prudence was not charged with establishing a school contrary to law. He noted "It is, however, no where alleged that the school was set up without license, or that the scholars were instructed by those who had no license" (*Crandall v. The State*, 10 CONN 367). On that minor point all of the justices agreed except one lone dissenter, Chief Justice Daggett, who had presided over the second trial and, amazingly, did not disqualify himself when the case came up on appeal. The conviction of Prudence Crandall was reversed.

Elated by her triumph in Hartford, Prudence married the Reverend Calvin Philleo, a Baptist minister from Ithaca, New York, a month later (Kimball 16). But news of the Supreme Court's decision did not please the townfolk of Canterbury. On September 9, 1834, a fire mysteriously erupted at her house. Although quickly extinguished, the fire had the desired effect of panicking Prudence and her pupils. The same night a band of men with heavy iron bars broke all the windows in the house (Larned 500). The next morning Reverend May was summoned to Canterbury, and he vividly described the scene:

Never before had Miss Crandall seemed to quail, and her pupils had become afraid to remain another night under her roof. The front rooms of the house were hardly tenable; and it seemed foolish to repair them only to be destroyed again. After due consideration, therefore, it was determined that the school should be abandoned. . . . I felt ashamed of Canterbury, ashamed of Connecticut, ashamed of my country, ashamed of my color (71).

Prudence sold her house as quickly as possible and left Connecticut forever (Larned

501). She and her husband moved to Illinois, where he died in 1874. She then travelled with her brother, Hezekiah, and took up residence in the small town of Elk Falls, Kansas (Adams 504).

What became of some of the principals in the Prudence Crandall case deserves mentioning. State Attorney Andrew T. Judson, who hounded Prudence at every opportunity, was rewarded by his constituents with the Congressional seat from East Connecticut. He subsequently was appointed United States District Court Judge for Hartford. William Wolcott Ellsworth, who defended Prudence, was elected Governor of Connecticut in 1838, and was succeeded in that office four years later by Chauncey F. Cleveland, who had been his adversary when the case came before the Supreme Court (Larned 522). Although the Black Law was repealed when Connecticut revised its statutes in 1838, Justice Daggett's opinion was cited by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney of the United States Supreme Court in the *Dred Scott* case in 1857, which held that Negroes could not be citizens of the United States (Scott v. Sandford, 19 Howard 393).

Fortunately, there is a happy epilogue to this story. In 1838, at the request of William Lloyd Garrison, the managers of the New England Anti-Slavery Society voted to ask Prudence to sit for a portrait. That oil painting, by artist Francis Alexander, eventually came into the possession of Reverend May, who, on the very day of his death, donated it to his old friend, Andrew Dixon White, president of Cornell University (Garrison 781). The painting hangs today in the library of Cornell.

After Prudence left Connecticut, the citizens of Canterbury changed their minds about black people and, through their politicians, vigorously opposed the extension of slavery in the United States. According to the historian of Eastern Connecticut, "Miss Crandall did not succeed in teaching many colored girls, but she *educated* the people of Windham County" (Larned 502). After the Civil War, Connecticut supported and quickly ratified the Fourteenth Constitutional Amendment in 1868, which affirmed full rights of citizenship upon black people.

In 1886, over fifty years after Prudence left Canterbury, the citizens of that town took steps to expiate the sins of their parents. They petitioned the General Assembly of Connecticut as follows:

We, the Undersigned, Citizens of the State, and of the Town of Canterbury, mindful of the dark blot that rests upon our fair fame and name, for the cruel outrages inflicted upon a former citizen of our Commonwealth, a noble Christian Woman (Miss Prudence Crandall, now Mrs. Philleo) at present in straightened circumstances, and far advanced in years, respectfully pray your Honorable Body to make such late reparation for the wrong done her, as your united wisdom, your love of justice, and an honorable pride in the good name of our noble State, shall dictate.

It will be remembered that she stands in the Records of the Court as a convicted criminal, and suffered unnumbered outrages in person and property, for benevolent work, that now to its great honor, the General Government itself is engaged in.

We respectfully suggest that you make a fair appropriation in her behalf, which shall at once relieve her from any anxiety for the future, and from the official stigma that rests upon her name, and purge our own record from its last remaining stain, in connection with the colored race ("Petition of the Citizens of the Town of Canterbury").

The petition contained 112 signatures. The State Legislature awarded Prudence an annuity of \$400. Three years later, on January 28, 1889, Prudence Crandall Philleo died

in Elk Falls in her eighty-sixth year (Adams, 504). Her epitaph, however, will not be found in Kansas. If you travel to Canterbury, Connecticut, you will see a lovely restored big white house on the Village Green. It is owned by the Connecticut Historical Commission and was dedicated as a museum in May, 1984 (Stenza B7). On the outside you will read:

In This House
PRUDENCE CRANDALL
Held a School
For Negro Girls
1833

NOTES

- ¹ The early history of American Abolitionism is well chronicled by Louis filler (10-47) and Dwight Lowell Dumond (151-82). John Hope Franklin details accounts of early violence (231-32, 239-45), while a broad but not well documented survey of the turbulence of the 1830s is provided by Lorman Ratner.
- ² Justice Daggett was pleased to quote Chancellor Kent because at that very moment he held the Kent Chair of Law at Yale University (Robinson 27).
- ³ Daggett's charge is contained in the record of the case on appeal (Crandall v. The State, 10 CONN 341-348).

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