



National
Women's
History
Museum

Presents:

The History of Women and Education




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Biographies

Prudence Crandall (1803-1890)



Prudence Crandall was a remarkable woman who opened one of the first schools for African American girls, despite the ridicule and harassment she faced because of her actions.

Prudence Crandall was born in Hopkinton, Rhode Island on September 3, 1803 to a Quaker family. She attended the New England Friends' Boarding School in Providence, where she was able to study subjects such as arithmetic, Latin and the sciences. Although most women during the early 1800's did not receive much education, Quakers (or Friends) believed that women should be educated.

In October of 1831, Crandall opened a private girl's academy in Canterbury, Connecticut. She taught the daughters of many of the town's wealthy families, and the school was ranked as one of the best in the state. Her curriculum was rigorous, as she taught her female students much of the same material being taught at prominent schools for boys.

In 1833, Crandall decided to admit an African American student named Sarah Harris, who wanted more education in order to become a teacher for African American children. The white students' parents were outraged and demanded that Sarah Harris be expelled. Crandall, however, opposed slavery and believed in educating African Americans. She refused to expel the young student and decided instead to open a new school for African American girls.

Prudence Crandall's new school met with much hostility. The four most prominent men in the town of Canterbury arranged a meeting in which they told Crandall that they were intent on destroying her school. The men objected to educating African Americans in their hometown and felt it might lead them to believe they were equal and to interracial marriages. Women in the 1800s were raised to obey men's wishes, but Crandall did not back down.

Crandall enlisted the help of William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, the nation's major antislavery newspaper. Garrison supported her and directed her to several families interested in sending their girls to Crandall's boarding school. Although African Americans, these families not only were emancipated, but also affluent enough to pay the tuition. In addition, Garrison placed advertisements for Crandall's school in his newspaper.

On March 9, 1833 the town held a protest meeting in response to Crandall's school. In 1833, women did not vote, hold public office, or speak at public meetings. Therefore, Crandall enlisted Samuel Joseph May, a Unitarian minister from a nearby town, and Arnold Buffum, an abolitionist lecturer, to represent her at the meeting. The three decided that they would offer to relocate the school further away from the center of town if someone would buy Crandall's home, where she conducted the boarding school. Although they tried, the men were not allowed to speak at the meeting on the grounds that they did not live in the town of Canterbury. The town voted to protest the school. May (who was kin to future writer Louisa May Alcott) waited until the meeting was

adjourned to make his speech. Some of the people stopped to listen. However his efforts were thwarted when one of the prominent townspeople ordered everyone out of the building.

The first week in April, 1833, Crandall began admitting students. She taught the girls advanced grammar, math and science so that they would one day be able to teach other African Americans. Inside the school, the girls enjoyed the peaceful activities of lectures and study but when they ventured outside they were met with threats and violence. The townspeople jeered rude comments at the girls and threw stones, eggs, and manure at them. Most of the shopkeepers refused to sell Crandall the goods she needed to run the school; she was forced to have her supplies shipped in. The Congregational church refused to allow her students to attend services, while other townspeople contaminated the water in her well.

Despite the hardships she faced, Crandall had many admirers and became known throughout the country and the world for her courage. Crandall received letters and gifts from American abolitionists and even from supporters as far away as Scotland, praising her brave actions.

Within months, the town of Canterbury led the legislature in passing the "Black Law," which made it illegal to open a school or academy that taught African American students from a state other than Connecticut. Crandall was arrested and jailed for providing education to African Americans under this law. The first trial ended in a hung jury – with all jurors, of course, being male – but was convicted in the second trial. A higher court reversed the decision, but on a technicality, not on principle, and angry townspeople continued to harass Crandall and her students. They threw stones, eggs, and mud at the schoolhouse and attempted to light it on fire. On the night of September 9, 1834, the townspeople made one last attempt to drive the schoolhouse to close by breaking most of the windows and smashing furniture in an angry mob attack. Although she had won her legal battle, Crandall feared for her students' safety and decided to close the school.

Only a month before, Crandall had married a Baptist minister and fellow abolitionist, Calvin Philleo, who had three children from an earlier marriage. After the school closed, the couple put the house up for sale and in the spring of 1835, left Connecticut for good. The family moved in with her parents briefly and then moved to Philleo's farm in New York. From there, they moved on to Illinois, where her family owned land in LaSalle County. There, she continued to teach and ran a school from her home. She also participated in women's rights activities, making speeches for the suffrage movement and for tolerance. In 1865, they moved to the Rock Island area, but the family was in constant financial stress; Philleo suffered from mental illness from the 1840s on to his 1874 death.

Prudence Crandall Philleo then moved to Elk Falls, Kansas to live with her brother. In 1884, a man named George Thayer wrote a book chronicling his bicycle journey across the nation. During his travels, Thayer paid a visit to the famous Prudence Crandall and wrote of this interview in his book. In 1886, the Connecticut legislature awarded a pension to her. One hundred and twelve citizens of Canterbury had signed a petition requesting the pension and said they were ashamed of their actions and how they had treated Prudence Crandall. Mark Twain, then a resident of Hartford, Connecticut, even attempted to persuade the people to buy back Crandall's original home. Crandall was pleased with these actions made on her behalf and continued to give lectures on topics of social justice. On January 28, 1890, Prudence Crandall died and was buried in Elk Falls cemetery.

Prudence Crandall is remembered by many for her great influence on abolition and the education of African Americans. Crandall's old schoolhouse in Canterbury is now the home of the Prudence Crandall museum and she was named Connecticut's state heroine.

Additional Resources:

Web sites:

[Connecticut Hall of Fame](#)
[The Prudence Crandall Museum](#)
[Letters & Documents relating to Prudence Crandall](#)

Secondary Books:

- Jurmain, Suzanne. *The Forbidden Schoolhouse: The True and Dramatic Story of Prudence Crandall and Her Students*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.
- Strane, Susan. *A Whole-Souled Woman: Prudence Crandall and the Education of Black Women*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1990.
- Thayer, George B. *Pedal and Path: Across the Continent Awheel and Afoot*. Hartford,

Conn.: Case, Lockwood & Brainard, n.d.

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

Primary Sources:

- Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, Volume III, 1886.
- May, Samuel J. *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict*, 1869.
- William Lloyd Garrison, *1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told By His Children*, 1885.
- Contemporary newspaper coverage in *The Liberator* and the Boston-based *Colonizationist* during 1833-34.

