

A Canterbury Tale: A Document Package for Connecticut's Prudence Crandall Affair

Edward S. Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States, Vol. 1*. London: 1835, p. 193-214.

On the 5th of August, I left Providence by the stage for Brooklyn in Connecticut, on my way to Canterbury, where a lady of the name of Crandall, a name that had been heard in every hamlet and house throughout the Union, — had set up a school for colored girls. My object, in thus going out of my road, was to see what could have caused so much ire to the liberal minds (*animis coelestibus*) of republican America.

I sat, the latter half of the journey, between the driver and another passenger. The former was not what we should consider in regular costume; as he had a travelling cap upon his head, and neither coat to his back nor shoes to his feet, which he had thrust into an old pair of slippers. He was a very civil and a noble fellow withal, who might well put to blush "the wealthy and the proud."

After some "confab" upon indifferent subjects, [the stage driver] asked, whether I had heard of what had lately taken place at Canterbury. As I wished to know what he had to say on the subject, I replied in general terms; and, after detailing the particulars, he launched out in praise of Miss Crandall's magnanimity and in censure of her persecutors. "For my part," said this single-hearted fellow, "I cannot see why a black skin should be a bar to any one's rising in the world or what crime there can be in trying to elevate any portion of society by education. It is prejudice alone that has made the distinction and, if a white man will not enter my coach because I have admitted, and always will admit, a colored person into it, all I can say is, he must find some other conveyance; or I must find some other employment. It is my firm belief, from what I know of these people, that if they had the same advantages as we have, they would be superior to us. But they have no chance as things are at present. Often, when they work for our people, they are unable to get their wages; and, as they know how strong the prejudice is against them, they dare not complain to a magistrate; besides, they are generally ignorant and thoughtless. One man, I knew myself, who worked for a farmer in this neighbourhood for a year. I often noticed him: he was an honest hard-working creature; — yet when the term had expired, his employer would not pay him one cent for his services." "Did no one," said I, "offer to assist him in obtaining justice?" "No! — he went off to another place, and I don't know what is become of him."

My other companion was of the same way of thinking. He was a laboring man — another proof that the country is less infected than the towns with this shocking antipathy; and that the humble tillers of the ground have, in this respect, more real dignity of character than the purse-proud merchant, or the flippant shop-boy, from whom the small vulgar borrow opinions and habits.

Having breakfasted at Brooklyn, the distance of which from Providence is about thirty miles, the Rev. Mr. May, to whom I had been introduced by a letter I brought with me, drove me over in his gig to Canterbury, seven miles off. The manner in which Miss Crandall, whom I had come to visit, has been calumniated and persecuted by her neighbors for doing what, in any part of Europe, would be

considered as an act at least harmless, if not meritorious, affords, perhaps, the most striking instance of intolerance and bigotry that its most uncivilized parts can exhibit in the nineteenth century. As, upon the principle involved in the decision of this case, depends the character of those republican institutions which are supposed to exist in the United States, some detailed history of these extraordinary proceedings may be excused. The chief facts of an occurrence in which the name of a young woman of mild disposition and retiring habits, has, without any fault of her own, been mixed up, are as follow.

Miss Crandall, the heroine of this "Canterbury tale," had for some time conducted, to the satisfaction of the inhabitants, at whose request, or by whose sanction, she had come into the village, a school for young females; and had admitted, as a scholar, the daughter of a respectable neighbor, whose quarterings were unfortunately not of pure European tinge. There was nothing objectionable in the conduct or character of the person thus introduced. She was a very fine young woman, about twenty years of age, if I might judge from her appearance. She had, indeed, so small a portion of the prohibited fluid in her veins, that she might have escaped observation at a soiree in London or Paris, except for her good looks and graceful manners. It should be observed, that the nearer the two castes approximate each other in complexion, the more bitter the enmity of the privileged; the jealousy of encroachment being sharpened in proportion as the barriers that separate them are removed. Shades of color like differences of religious opinion, augment by their minuteness, the hatred of the orthodox and predominant party. The pressure from above increases with the elastic force below. Forbearance may be shewn, where admittance to equality is rarely, if ever, claimed; — but contempt and contumely and persecution are sure to be the lot of those who seem to stand on the "vantage ground," and claim the full and free payment of their rights.

It soon, however, became apparent, that this violation of "the established order of things" was viewed with an unfavorable eye by the aristocracy of Canterbury; that the pale faces were gradually disappearing from the ladies' school; and that the whole flock would, before long, dwindle away into one solitary "black sheep."

Resolved not to dismiss, whatever might be said or hinted, the innocent cause of this discontent, the mistress of the establishment had recourse to the only expedient which would enable her to do justice both to her pupil and to herself. She changed her white school into a colored school. In vain her former friends and supporters entreated, remonstrated, and threatened. She persisted in spite equally of advice and opposition. The hallowed soil of Canterbury was polluted by the feet of colored "misses." The sacred privacy of Andrew J. Judson was "broken in upon" by the sable visages at Miss Crandall's windows. What was to be done under such an intolerable insult? How were the rights and privileges of the good citizens of this patrician town to be protected from the intrusion? Immediate application was made to a paternal government; and the legislature passed a law that it was hoped would effectually abate the nuisance, as no colored children from other States could, under its Provisions, be introduced into the place against the wishes of the majority of the inhabitants. They had, however, miscalculated the temperament of their victim. She set both her oppressors and their ex-post-facto statute at defiance. She persisted in keeping her school. She was prosecuted; and declining, by the advice of her lawyer, to give bail, she was sent to prison, and confined (not intentionally it was afterwards stated) in the very room which a murderer had just quitted^[1].

The next day, she was released, on producing the securities required; and when I was there, the trial was expected to take place in a few days. An appeal from the verdict, if against her, was to be made to the proper tribunal of the State; and from thence, if necessary, to the Supreme Court of the federal

government. In the mean time, her enemies, by employing every weapon that baffled resentment and vulgar malice could suggest, were endeavoring to drive her from the place, or render her stay uncomfortable and dangerous. She had been openly insulted and derided; she had been surrounded or followed, when walking out with her pupils, by troops of boys, who annoyed her by blowing horns, beating drums, and playing "rough music" with tongs and other noisy instruments. A large stone was one night, about nine o'clock, thrown in at the window, when the family happened to be upstairs. The window was left in the same state as it was in, after the outrage; and the stone, which was as broad as my fist, though not quite so thick, was put into my hands. Had it struck any of the females — there was not a man in the house — the blow might have inflicted a very serious injury.

In addition to these annoyances, no tradesman in the place would supply her with what she wanted; and she was obliged to send either to Norwich, fourteen miles off, or to Providence, more than twice that distance, for her groceries and other articles of domestic consumption. When I add, that no one had ever cast the slightest doubt upon her character, and that she was at the time in a weak state of health, the baseness of her unmanly tormentors will be still more striking.

The following correspondence will speak for itself.

"To MISS PRUDENCE CRANDALL.

"When the Committee visited you last February, stating their objections to your school, they understood from you, by your voluntary suggestion, that you should never desire, and never would put your colored schollars into the meeting-house — that you would have preaching at your own house, either black or white; and you also added, that the citizens of Canterbury need have no anxiety on that account, they might be assured no such request would ever be made.

"It appears now that you have departed from this Voluntary declaration, and put your colored schollars into pews ever occupied by the white females of the parish. We ask you to inform us soon by whose licence you have thus taken possession of the meeting-house.

"SOLOMON PAYNE,
ANDREW HARRIS,
ISAAC KNIGHT,
SOCIETY COMMITTEE, 26th July, 1833.

"Please inform Dr. Harris to-day."

"To SOLOMON PAYNE, &c.
Canterbury, 29th July, 1833.

"GENTLEMEN,

"I received a letter from you on the 21st,^[2]

in which you ask me to inform you, by whose licence I have taken possession of that part of the meeting house that was occupied by my scholars on the Sabbath previous. I can inform you, that the authority, whether lawful or unlawful, by which I permitted my family to enter the gallery of your church, was permission received from two of the Society's committee, viz.: — Dr. Harris and Deacon Bacon.

"On Saturday, the 6th of this month, I sent a verbal request, by Samuel L. Hough, to the gentlemen whom I address, asking your permission to attend Divine worship with you on the Sabbath. I asked Captain Hough to inform you that I would purchase seats sufficient for my scholars, if agreeable to you; if not, any part or portion of the meeting-house you might see fit for us to occupy would be acceptable. Of this Mr. Hough said he informed you. Dr. Harris, in answer, said, we might occupy the seat in the gallery appropriated to colored persons. Mr. H. then remarked, that the seat would not be sufficient to seat the scholars. Deacon Bacon then replied, that we might take the next pews, until we had enough to be seated.

"Truly I said this to the Committee that visited me on February last: — 'The scholars that come here shall not trouble you on the Sabbath; for we can have preaching either by colored or white ministers in our own house.' The Committee made me no reply at the time, if I am not mistaken, — and I think I am not.

"Upon mature consideration, (as regular preaching here was not very readily obtained,) I considered that I had done entirely wrong in depriving my scholars from attending religious worship in this village.

"These are my reasons for asking the privilege of entering your church; and all the licence I have is as given above.

Yours, with respect,
P. CRANDALL."

If I might judge of what I saw, both of this lady and of her establishment, during the three or four hours I remained there, never was there a person less deserving of such treatment. As for her pupils, — it would be no easy matter to explain to an European, how any man of common sense could fancy the tranquillity of a country village could be disturbed, and the "rights of its inhabitants" (such was the jargon used on this occasion) could, by any possible combination of "untoward" circumstances, be invaded by nineteen young women; — unless it were, that their good looks and lady-like deportment might excite jealousy and envy among the belles and matrons of the district. Most of them had better claims to grace and beauty than an equal number of Anglo-American females taken indiscriminately. Some were scarcely to be distinguished from whites; and all were dressed with as much taste and propriety as could be found in any other school of the same kind.

Trifling as this event may seem, it had created no slight degree of interest in the friends of the Pariah caste, and a much greater degree of alarm among its enemies, as it may lead to consequences destructive of the contemptuous ascendancy assumed by the latter. Among the many letters of condolence, and congratulation, and abuse which Miss Crandall had received, was one with this remarkable superscription:

"To Miss Prudence Crandall, (inhumanly and despotically imprisoned by a people calling themselves freemen,) Brooklyn, &c." The Montreal postmark was upon it; but, as "*private*" was written inside, the writer's name was not mentioned to me. Such proceedings might well excite indignation in a free country like Canada.

After all the ink shed in prose and verse about this little establishment, it must occasion a smile to hear that nothing like rivalry with "fashionable ladies" could ever be promoted by it; that none of the ornamental branches of education were taught there; and the utmost ever contemplated was to afford the simple accomplishments of reading, writing, and arithmetic; with a general knowledge of common

subjects. To qualify its inmates by these, and the aid of religious principles, for the active duties of life; and raise, by their example and influence, an unhappy race from a state of degradation and despondency, to brighter hopes, and a more honorable rank in society, is the only crime that has ever, with the least shadow of truth, been imputed to the "village school-mistress" and her friends.

Mr. Judson, whose name occurs most frequently in this business, as the chief actor, is the lawyer and great man of the place. Soon after he had displayed so much zeal in the same cause as that which the Colonization Society have undertaken, he was elected Secretary of the Windham County Colonization Society; — an appropriate reward for his services.

Miss Crandall's trial came on at Brooklyn in August. Judge Eaton, who tried her, was one of the committee of the legislature that drew up the law under which she was indicted. He charged the jury three times to convict her; and evinced throughout a marked spirit of hostility against her [3]. Five of the jury were for her, and seven against her each time. As they could not agree, she was discharged. The second trial ought to have taken place in December following before the same judge; but, in October, she was indicted under a new writ, and brought before Judge Daggett, who was well known, both for his attachment to the colonization cause, and for the active part he had taken against a projected college for colored young men at Newhaven, the University of which, it was alleged, would be injured by its establishment. It was not likely, therefore, that the question at issue would meet with an impartial and unbiassed consideration in that quarter[4]. The prisoner was convicted; and appealed, from the sentence, to the Court of Errors, where the original proceedings were quashed on the ground of an alleged informality — a very convenient loop-hole to creep out at.

The law, under which Miss Crandall was arraigned, is as follows:

"Whereas attempts have been made to establish literary institutions in this State, for the instruction of colored persons belonging to other states and countries, which [meaning, probably, the attempts] would tend to the great increase of the colored Population of the State, and thereby to the injury of the people: therefore it is enacted, 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, nor [or] instruct or teach in any school, academy, or literary institution; or harbor or board, for the purpose of attending or being taught or instructed [meaning, probably, harbor for the purpose of teaching] in any such school, any colored person not an inhabitant of any town in this State without the consent, in writing, first obtained of the majority of the civil authority and select men of the town, where such school is situated [to be situated] on penalty," &c.

It was at first proposed to enforce an old law against Miss Crandall; but its "damnatory clauses" went too far even for the *liberty* these people wish to exercise. By a similar enactment in Rhode Island, the majority of any town may remove from among them any one settled there, if so disposed. Not long ago a Methodist preacher took up his abode in a country village of that State, and excited, by his sermons, a spirit of great animosity among the people. They notified to the town clerk their wish that he should forthwith quit, or be expelled at the cart's tail. The man in office had happily more discretion than his neighbours; and the intruder, though fully aware of the light in which he was viewed, remained.

An old law of Connecticut, dated 1650, says: "no master of a familye shall give interteinment or habietation to any younge man to sojourne in his familye, but by the allowance of the inhabitants of the towne where he dwells, under the penalty of twenty shillings per week." It was reserved for the nineteenth century, and the town of Canterbury, to exclude females.

The whole question turns upon one point; — whether blacks (a term that includes all the various shades of color) can be citizens. Mr. Justice Daggett maintained that they are not citizens, and quoted, in support of his dictum, the opinion of Chancellor Kent. The passage cited, however, is very far from confirming the position thus assumed. It is to be found in his 2d vol., p. 250. "In most of the United States there is a distinction, in respect to political privileges, between free white persons, and free colored 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^[5], of inferior rank and condition in society. Marriages are forbidden between them and whites in some of the States; and, when not actually contrary to law, they are revolting, and regarded as an offence against public decorum."

The commentator then refers to the Statutes of Illinois and Massachusetts which I have before quoted, and proceeds: "A similar statute-provision exists in Virginia, and in North Carolina. Such connexions in France and Germany constitute the degraded state of concubinage, which is known in the civil law — " (the learned author means that such connexions are analogous to what are classed, under the civil law, under the term concubinage; not that marriage between blacks and whites is prohibited in France or Germany — no such absurd restriction being known in either.) "But they are not legal marriages, because the parties want the equality of state or condition, which is essential to the contract." The author has declared, in another passage, that "Indians never can be made citizens"; but, he is so far from asserting the same of the people in question that he says, in the 1st vol. page 215 of his Commentaries, and in the 2d vol. page 71, directly the reverse.

In the former he says, "The general qualification of electors of the Assembly, &c., are, that they be of the age of twenty-one years and upwards, and free resident *citizens*, &c. In some of the States they are required to possess property and to be *white* as well as *free* citizens." In the latter these are his words: "The article in the constitution of the United States, declaring that citizens of each State were entitled to all the privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States, applies only to natural born, or duly naturalized citizens; and, if they remove from one State to another, they are entitled to the privileges that persons of the same description are entitled to in the State to which the removal is made, and to none other. If, therefore, for instance, free persons of color are not entitled to vote in Carolina, free persons of color emigrating there from a Northern State, would not be entitled to vote."

It may well be doubted whether the restriction here employed is warranted by the words in the constitution, in which nothing is said about "persons, of the same description": — a paraphrastic mode of interpretation, rather convenient than honest. There can be no doubt, however, that the allusion either acknowledges the right of citizenship in the black, or is perfectly nugatory and irrelevant.

By the first section of the second article of the constitution of New York State, "No man of color, *unless* he shall have been for three years a *citizen* of this State (New York), and for one year next preceding any election, shall be seised and possessed of a freehold estate of the value of 250 dollars, over and above all incumbrances, charged thereon, and shall have been actually rated and paid a tax thereon, shall be entitled to vote at any such election;" — (i.e. for representatives.)

This is a question of the utmost importance: for as none but citizens can hold land in most of the States, or vote for members of Congress, not only would the titles of estates purchased of blacks by many whites be shaken; but the whole frame of government, with all its obligations, internal and external, and all its statutes, made by legislators to whose election blacks have contributed, might be endangered, if

it were decided by the highest authority of the land that no one of African descent can be a citizen of the United States [6].

A few observations more upon this point may be pardoned. In the different Acts of Congress, which have been passed to establish rules of naturalization, "any alien, being a free white person, may be admitted to become a citizen of the United States." Then follow the conditions and qualifications. Now, if, as the Judsonians maintain, a colored person can never be a citizen, why was the epithet "white" employed on the occasion? Had no blacks been admitted to citizenship at home, Congress would not have thought of excluding them from it when aliens. Exclusion by legislative enactment implies the absence of previous disqualification by the constitution. In most of the States, the word "white" is used in fixing the qualification for voters, with the express object of excluding colored persons who would otherwise have been entitled to the franchise.

A free mulatto convicted of a crime, which, by a law passed in 1823, subjected him to be sold, was purchased and taken from Virginia to Tennessee; the Circuit Court of which, on his petition, decided in favor of his freedom, on the ground that the statute under which he had been condemned was contrary both to the Bill of Rights of Virginia, and to that clause in the constitution of the United States which prohibits bills of attainder. Considering the origin and object of this instrument, the protection thus afforded must have been given to him as a citizen.

The Secretary of State is empowered by an act of Congress, to grant passports to American citizens visiting foreign countries. Mr. Purvis, son-in-law of James Forten, a man highly respected, in spite of his African blood, at Philadelphia, received one not long ago on application. As it described him as a person of color, another passport, through the kindness of Mr. Roberts Vaux, was procured for him in the usual form. Here is a recognition from the highest authority to every foreign nation, that a colored man is a citizen of the United States. It may appear tedious to dwell so much on this point; but what must be the state of feeling in any country, when a judge, who depends upon it for his bread, can risk his professional reputation in asserting what any stranger, who happens to be travelling through it, can see at once to be as unfounded in principle as it is iniquitous in its motive and object?

On our return to Brooklyn, Mr. May introduced me, after I had partaken of his hospitality, to a very interesting old man, who has been for more than sixty years an uncompromising abolitionist. He was then in his 80th year, and was enjoying the retrospect of a good and useful life, and doubling its term by recalling past events in the bosom of his family. Here I spent the remainder of the evening, with as much pleasure as if I had been surrounded by the friends of my youth. It was a lovely night; and we sat chatting in the porch before the door, till the hour of retiring to rest dispersed the group, the female part of which had already been drawn away by a young man, whose voice, accompanied by a guitar he held in his hand, had greater attractions for his fair audience than a philosophical discussion on the aristocracy of the skin, or a moral estimate of the influence which public opinion in Europe might exercise upon public conduct in America.

At this particular time there was an interest attached to the spot, that will render it memorable in the annals of the nation. A new aera was commencing for no inconsiderable portion of its population; and the success which awaits the noble efforts made in their behalf, will be associated in the memory of a grateful race with the humble but honored name of a school-mistress in the neighborhood — a "village Hampden, that with dauntless breast the little tyrant of" her "fields withstood."

The plague-spot that has infected the cities and towns and hamlets of the whole commonwealth, has been thrown off from the healthy and manly minds of many of the farmers in the neighborhood of Brooklyn. One of them said to me in his frank and open manner, that he knew no distinction between man and man; and should think himself disgraced if he refused to sit down at the same table with any human being who differed from him in complexion only. This same man, when it was proposed at a public meeting, to remove the people of color to seats more remote, from the body of the church, to which he belongs, strongly opposed the proposition, and declared, that, if the resolution were carried, they should sit in his own pew. The thin-skinned whites took nothing by the motion.

The stage was nearly full; and the conversation turned upon the subject of the Canterbury school. A military man, who was one of the passengers, observed, that he had never heard so much about the blacks as he had during his short stay in Brooklyn, to which he had come on a visit from Pittsburgh, where he was quartered. All parties were agreed in condemning poor Miss Crandall. One said that she was a mere tool in the bands of agitators and fanatics, who had gained her over to their cause by paying her debts: another assured the person, with whom he was zealously discussing the matter, that, to his certain knowledge, all the disturbance had originated with Mr. Judson's enemies — who were his enemies he did not say. The friends of a man, who could persecute an unprotected unoffending female, can be bound to him by no tie that honor or humanity would acknowledge. Having listened very patiently for some time to what was said, I at last, remarked that it seemed to me to be "much ado about nothing," and that, as an European, I thought it highly ridiculous that a great nation should see civil war and commotion in a swarthy skin. I could not understand, I said, how it was that, in the very place where the white and black children of the humbler classes were educated together, any one should insult the parents of the latter by openly asserting that schools for the wealthier classes ought not to admit a colored pupil among them. This citizen of a republic must be either above or below public opinion. He does not want the suffrages of his neighbours, or he despises them. If the carpenter's and mason's child escape contamination in the public schools, the lawyer need not fear for his daughter's "gentility" and purity, even though a brunette should be admitted to her presence.

Footnotes

1. "In England, the subject has a better chance for justice against the Sovereign, than in this country a citizen has against a State. The crown is never its own arbiter; and they who sit in judgment, have no interest in the event of their decision."

— Mr. Bayard on the Judiciary in Congress — 1802.

If it were not for the Supreme Court of the United States, which checks their arbitrary dispositions, the local legislatures would degenerate into the vilest tyrannies the world ever saw. It is on this account that those States which are most aristocratical are least inclined to acquiesce in its decisions; and more opposition has been made to its authority by the slave oligarchies than by the free democracies — a fact which shows that the republican principle is not necessarily weakened by strengthening the general government.

2. There seems to be a mistake here in the dates: — owing perhaps, to the hurry of transcription.
3. The judges in Connecticut are appointed by the legislative power; and, if I mistake not, are, with the exception of those in the supreme and superior courts, who hold office *quam diu se bene gesserint*, removable on an address to the executive by two thirds of the two houses of assembly. "If the legislature," says Daniel Webster, "may remove judges at pleasure, assigning no cause for such removal, of course it is not to be expected that they would often find decisions against the constitutionality of their own acts. If the legislature should unhappily be in a temper to do a violent thing, it would probably be in a temper to take care to see that the bench of justice was so constituted as to agree with it in opinion." Webster's Speeches, p. 220.
4. How far the judges are inclined to be subservient to the legislature, (or whatever may be the appointing power,) may be seen in the case of Judge Clayton, whose example would inform them what price they must pay for independence. He was dismissed from his office in Georgia for the opinion he had given in favor of the Cherokees — an opinion confirmed by the high authority of Chancellor Kent, who thus expressed himself in a letter to him, dated Oct. 13, 1831. "I am most entirely persuaded that the Cherokee title to the sole use and undisturbed enjoyment of their mines is as entire and perfect as to any part of their lands, or as to any use of them whatever."
5. If by the word "essentially" he meant a distinction founded in nature, the author contradicts here what he said at the New York State Convention, that the distinction of color was unknown in Europe." If he intended to say, that the minds of his countrymen are essentially imbued with a feeling that opposes itself to the elevation of the class alluded to, he merely asserts what every body knows, and what, he must be well aware is connected with causes, that explain its existence, while they demonstrate its injustice. The ex-chancellor is too shrewd a man to misunderstand the text in Tacitus — "proprium humani generis odisse quem laeseris" — and too good a man to took for its commentary in his own bosom. What must be the force of prejudice, when such a mind can bend before it!
6. Aliens cannot hold land in the United States unless, as the Act of Congress of April, 1802, directs, in Sect. 4, they are "*naturalized or admitted* to the rights of citizenship." Whether the law of Ohio, authorizing them to hold land, be constitutional or not, is another question; but in New York State, they certainly cannot. Now persons of color, as I have just shewn, not only hold land in that State and vote for representatives, but must have a freehold estate of the value of 250 dollars to have a vote at all.