

# The magnificent martyrdom of Prudence Crandall

*Alone against a hate-blinded town, the shy schoolmarm defended her 20 helpless girls ~ and a cherished principle*



BY EUGENE RACHLIS

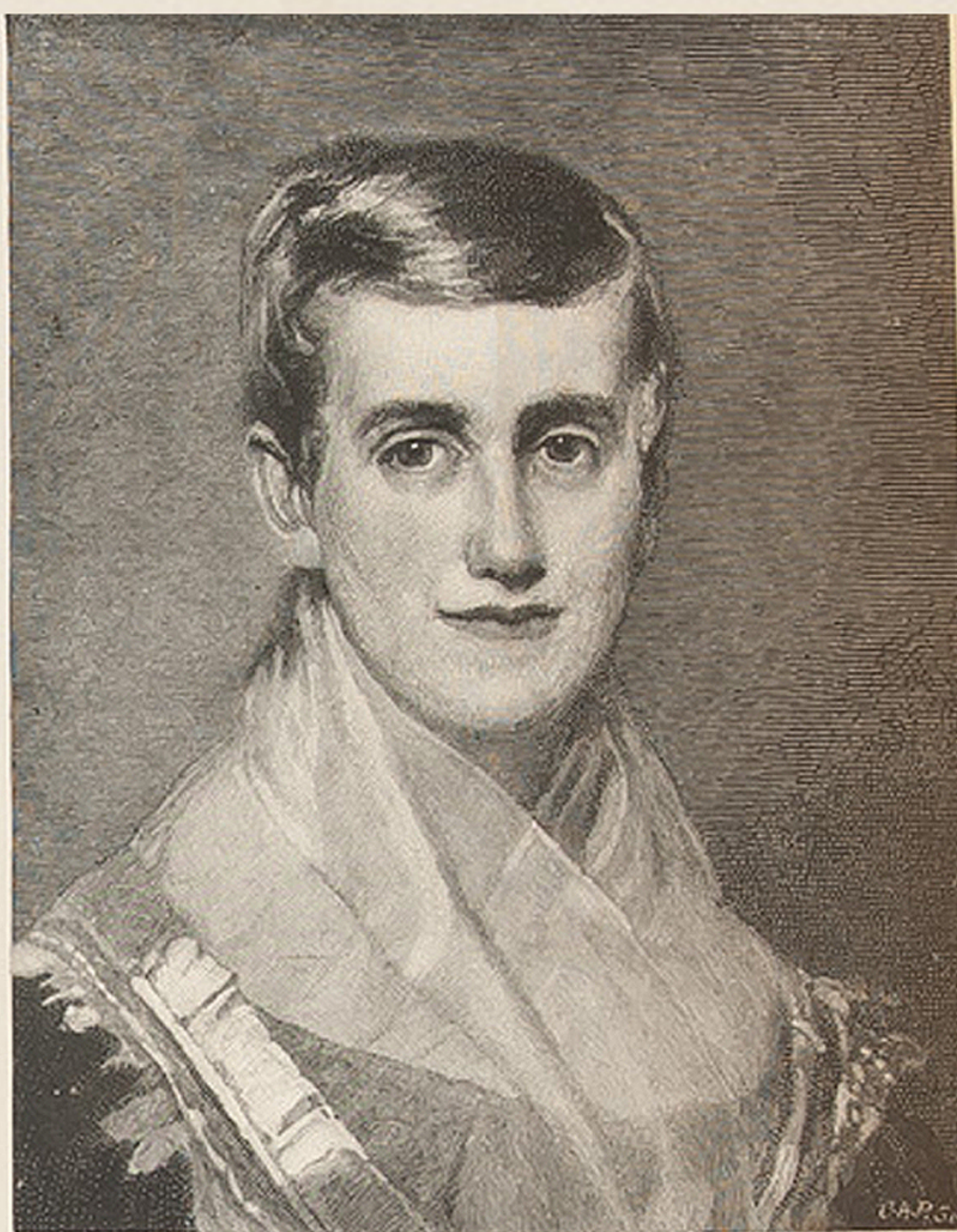
**P**RUDENCE CRANDALL was a 19th-century New England schoolmarm—genteel, plain-featured and boyishly thin. By no burst of imagination could anyone have considered her a wild radical.

Yet from the spring of 1833 to the fall of 1834, Prudence Crandall tenaciously fought to defend a principle against the townspeople of Canterbury, Connecticut, a bucolic town of 1,881, nestled in a green valley 40 miles southeast of Hartford. During this same period, the people of Canterbury degenerated into a bitter, angry mob, resorting to clubs, arson and rotten eggs to grind her under.

Prudence Crandall and Canterbury came into conflict over an is-



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PRUDENCE CRANDALL.

sue that is now familiar, but which in 1833 was new to the U.S.A.: school desegregation. The case of the State of Connecticut vs. Prudence Crandall marked the first time an American court was asked to decide whether Negroes had a right to an education.

Early in 1831, Miss Crandall, then 27, was engaged as headmistress of Canterbury's new seminary for young ladies. But one day in 1832, she picked up a copy of the *Liberator*, an abolitionist newspaper edited by the fiery William Lloyd Garrison. The young Quaker schoolmarm wept over articles describing the plight of slaves in the South and the problems confronting free Negroes in the North.

"My feelings began to awaken," she wrote a friend. "I saw that the prejudice of the whites against color was deep and inveterate . . . I contemplated the manner in which I might best serve the people of color. As wealth was not mine, I saw no other means of benefiting them than by imparting to those of my own sex that were anxious to learn, all the instruction I might be able to give, however small the amount."

Her initial contribution was indeed small. Sarah Harris, a Negro girl, who lived just outside of Canterbury, wanted to become a teacher but lacked the necessary education. She brought her problem to Prudence Crandall.

Miss Crandall knew that permitting Sarah to attend her school would create a furor. Many of her Canterbury sponsors belonged to the American Colonization Society—an organization that favored deporting free Negroes to Africa. Nevertheless, she decided to help Sarah Harris. In January 1833, the girl



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was admitted to the Canterbury Female Boarding School—the only Negro in a roomful of white girls.

Within a few days Prudence Crandall felt the first shock waves of opposition from outraged parents. Her first caller, the wife of the Episcopal minister, coldly warned that unless Sarah was expelled immediately the school's financial support would be cut off. But Prudence Crandall would not budge.

"The school may sink," she told the town elders, "but I shall not turn Sarah Harris out."

Seeking help, the embattled teacher wrote William Lloyd Garrison, asking if it were possible "to obtain 25 young ladies of color to enter the school for the term of one year." Garrison invited her to Boston to discuss the proposal, and subsequently she visited abolitionists in Providence and New York. All promised to recruit Negro students. In February 1833, Prudence Crandall dismissed all her white students, closed the school and announced that she would reopen in April for Negro girls only.

In desperation, civic leaders called a special town meeting for the evening of March 9. Prudence Crandall thought it would be wiser if she did not attend, but was represented by abolitionist Samuel May, the Unitarian minister in the nearby village of Brooklyn, and Arnold Buffum of the New England Anti-slavery Society.

The town meeting drew a full house at the Congregational Church. Speaker after speaker roundly condemned Miss Crandall. When her spokesmen rose to oppose a vote of censure, they were drowned out by angry shouts, and the resolutions were adopted unanimously.

News of the meeting focused wide attention on Prudence Crandall, however. "Miss Crandall must be sustained at all costs," wrote William Lloyd Garrison.

On April 1, Prudence Crandall's school opened, with 20 Negro girls from Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island and Connecticut in attendance. Almost immediately, the Negro students were annoyed on the streets and refused church pews, while shopkeepers refused to sell the school food or supplies.

More ominously, the sheriff invoked a musty ordinance, the Pauper and Vagrancy Law. It required nonresidents to post a bond or pay a fine of \$1.67 a week. Nonpayment



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within ten days was punishable by ten whiplashes across the back.

The first student to be charged with breach of the law was 16-year-old Eliza Hammond of Providence. She refused to pay the fine and offered herself for whipping. At the last moment, however, the abolitionists posted the necessary bond, thus saving the town from the criticism it certainly would have drawn for whipping a child.

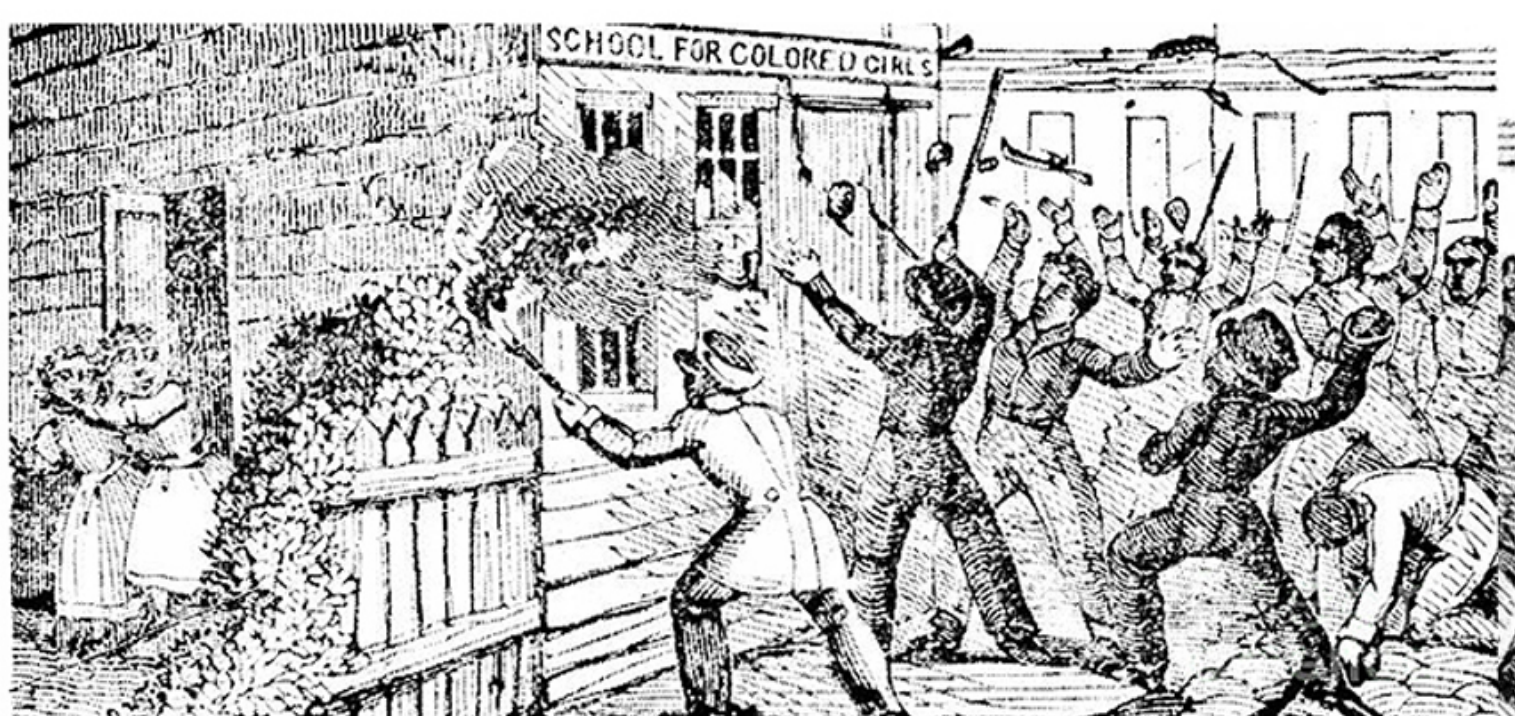
Abruptly, Miss Crandall's foes changed their tactics. They persuaded the State Legislature to enact a "Black Law," stipulating that no Negroes from outside Connecticut could be taught in a private school in the state without permission of local authorities. When news of this victory reached Canterbury, church bells pealed jubilantly for half an hour, and the cannon on the village green boomed. Prudence Crandall couldn't maintain her school now!

She did, though, and late in June she was arrested for violating the "Black Law." Pending trial, she was given a chance to go free by posting bond. To the dismay of her opponents, the schoolteacher chose jail—a propaganda stratagem devised by her abolitionist backers. They reported that she had been placed in a cell last inhabited by a wife-murderer—who had gone from it to the gallows.

Actually, the abolitionists were not going to permit the martyred schoolmarm to suffer. Her friend Samuel May saw that her cell was thoroughly cleaned and a new bed substituted for its regular dirty pallet. He also arranged for a young local girl to spend the night with her. The next day, he posted bond, and Miss Crandall was released.

Outwitted, Canterbury responded with fresh abuse. Townspeople blew horns and fired pistols in the air whenever the Negro students ventured on the streets. The school was barraged daily with rotten eggs and stones, a doctor refused to answer calls for medical help, and a load of manure was dumped into the school's well.

To keep up the students' spirits,





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Miss Crandall led them to Sunday services at churches in less hostile communities, and sympathetic visitors to the little assemblies held at Miss Crandall's school were touched to hear the harassed Negro girls singing:

*But we forgive, forgive the men,  
That persecute us so.*

*May God in mercy save their  
souls*

*From everlasting woe.*

In August 1833, Prudence Crandall went on trial. Her lawyers quickly challenged the constitutionality of Connecticut's "Black Law." Three times the jury returned to the courtroom to announce it could not reach a decision. Exasperated, the judge ordered the jury excused.

But Canterbury did not consider this defeat as final; in Superior Court, fresh charges were brought against Prudence Crandall.

**T**HE ARGUMENTS offered by the prosecution and defense now have a familiar ring. Said Miss Crandall's attorneys, W.W. Ellsworth and Calvin Goddard: "These pupils are human beings, born in these states, and owe the *same obligation* to the state . . . as white citizens. . . . If allegiance is due from our colored population, its correlative is due from the Government. . . . If allegiance is an ordination of heaven, it reaches and binds and confers rights upon every man. . . . Here the free man of color may . . . demand his political rights."

Prosecutor Andrew Judson denied that free Negroes were citizens of any state. The principles set forth by Prudence Crandall's lawyers, he said, would "destroy the government itself . . . blotting out this nation of white men and substituting one from the African race. . . . The state does possess the power to regulate its own schools, and pursue its own systems of education, in its own chosen way . . ."

In his charge to the jury, Judge David Daggett said that the "evils and degrading consequences" of slavery were not at issue. Neither were "the benefits, blessings and advantages of education." The only question before the jury was whether the "Black Law" was in keeping with the U.S. Constitution. This, he said, depended solely on whether free Negroes were citizens.

It was Judge Daggett's opinion that they were not—and the jury returned a verdict against Prudence



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Crandall. At once her lawyers appealed the case to the Supreme Court of Errors, Connecticut's highest court. There, Judge Daggett reversed the lower court decision on a technicality—ruling that the charges brought against Prudence Crandall had been improperly drawn up.

It was a personal victory for the Quaker schoolmistress, but a disappointment to her abolitionist supporters, who had hoped to establish a legal precedent. And it was a bitter defeat for the town of Canterbury, which once more turned to violence.

Early in September, a mysterious fire broke out in the school building. Miss Crandall and her terrified students managed to put it out, but the charred walls remained as a reminder of the town's determination to rid itself of the stubborn teacher and her "little misses of color."

And shortly after midnight on September 9, 1834, men armed with iron bars smashed in five windows on the ground floor of the school. While the Negro girls cowered in their upstairs bedrooms, the vandals demolished the downstairs rooms and furnishings.

Fearing for herself and for her students, Prudence Crandall decided to close the school. Amid tearful farewells, the girls were sent home, and Miss Crandall herself left Canterbury and dropped out of sight. Education for Negroes seemed to be a lost cause.

In 1886, a Connecticut traveler met Prudence Crandall in Elk Falls, Kansas, a widow of 82, still lively and still interested in the lot of the American Negro. Belatedly, the Connecticut Legislature voted her an annual pension of \$400 as partial compensation for the loss she had suffered in Canterbury. Miss Crandall accepted the money as a "just debt" of the state which had destroyed her hopes. She was grateful, too, for "the change that has been wrought in the views and feelings of the mass of the people."

Four years later, on January 28, 1890, she died.



*"Prudence Crandall, Woman of Courage"*



## Prudence Crandall

In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court issued its controversial decision ordering the desegregation of all public schools. While presenting their arguments, lawyers for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People cited the Crandall case as the "first comprehensive crystallization of antislavery constitutional theory in America."

Prudence Crandall would have appreciated this recognition. History had paid its "just debt."

**Coronet**

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