

Perils of Prudence

How many times can Prudence Crandall's wondrous lesson be buried by the indifference of elected officials?

From the evidence, Gov. Rowland has thought of Prudence Crandall's courage on two occasions.

The first was on Oct. 1, 1995, when he elevated Crandall, a century after her death, to the lofty status of Official State Female Hero. This put her on a par with the Official State Male Hero, Nathan Hale, who gave his life and a time-honored quote to the Revolutionary effort.

The second time our chief executive thought about Prudence Crandall, who like Hale paid dearly for her actions, was last winter. He decided then that her memory was unaffordable. With the prospect of large state deficits and unions refusing to accede to his demands, the Canterbury museum bearing Crandall's name would close, along with other sites under the aegis of the Connecticut Historical Commission.

This news sent the guardians of history into a frenzy of lobbying. They'd had some practice lately, for, whatever his merits, Rowland had never demonstrated great passion for the symbols of the state's heritage. It is true that he has come around in matters of art. Assaulted by the numbers—persuasive arguments that art means big business—he lifted the category from state budgetary footnote to a chapter all its own. He is rightly proud of his effort to raise per-capita spending on the arts community to the highest in the nation. But in the business of state identity and heritage, art is not all.

Historians tread lightly on this. "I have nothing against interpretive dance," Kaz Kozlowski told me on my visit to the nearly boarded-up Prudence Crandall Museum in Canterbury. The museum's founding director (and only remaining employee) argued that a well-rounded and refined society can't live on art alone, and that the lessons of where we came from are indispensable.

My visit to the museum was long overdue, though I'd been interested in the Prudence Crandall case from the day it opened to the public in 1983. I had not heard of Crandall before that, and I wasn't alone. Kozlowski, who grew up in Connecticut and is a well-educated historian, was unfamiliar with the name until she was interviewed for the job.

In this, she's had distinguished company. Jennifer Rycenga, a native of Fairfield who

studied at Yale and now teaches comparative religion and women's issues at San Jose State University, had no idea of Prudence Crandall's triumphs and trials. She stumbled across them while she was doing other research and became so enamored of the story that she is now writing a book, tentatively titled *A Life of Opposition: Prudence Crandall and Her Times*.

The Crandall story, she says, is not well-known because of "the ambivalence in our society toward abolitionists." It is also true that Connecticut doesn't think of itself as a state that excludes people, though it certainly has been one. Through much of our histo-

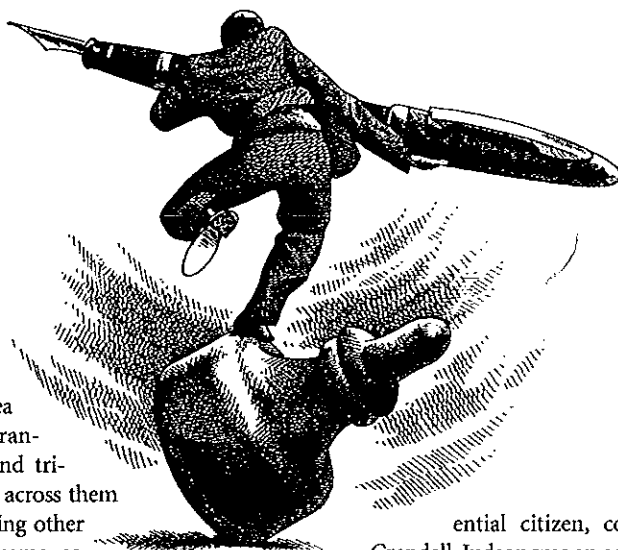
Once again, the future of Crandall's school for black girls is in Hartford's hands. What value will the governor and legislature assign the lessons of courage?

Not much, it appears.

ry, it was illegal to build a synagogue or a mosque. It was also forbidden, from 1834 to 1838, to do what Prudence Crandall did.

For those who may benefit from a brief (and entirely inadequate) accounting, I offer the following: Crandall, a much admired teacher, was recruited in 1831 to open a private school for girls in Canterbury, a small community in the eastern part of the state. She was celebrated for a time; students adored her, and so did their parents. Then she decided—after struggling with her conscience and consulting her Bible—to give 19-year-old Sarah Harris what she so desperately wanted: a seat in her school. Sarah Harris was black, and her arrival in the classroom had far-reaching consequences.

Andrew Judson, Canterbury's most influ-



ential citizen, confronted Crandall. Judson was an advocate of the Colonization Movement, which sent blacks to live in Africa. He wanted them to teach Christianity there. Crandall wondered whether Judson's exclusionary brand of the religion was worthy of export. When Judson raised the possibility that students of color might eventually intermarry, Crandall responded that Moses' wife was black.

But Crandall's defense of her actions succeeded only in emptying her school of white students. She enlisted the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison of Boston to help her fill the school anew, this time entirely with "Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color." There were enough free families in New England who could pay the \$100 per year tuition to put Crandall's school back in business—that is, until the town put its foot down. There was a successful effort to pass legislation in Hartford—the "Black Laws"—which outlawed such a school without town consent. Crandall was hauled to court three times, and even spent a night in jail, though the case was never resolved.

If the legal system didn't quite stop her from teaching, the mob did. On one occasion, someone set fire to her school (it was put out before great damage was done). On another, windows were smashed. It became clear to Crandall that she could not guarantee the safety of her girls. The Rev. Samuel Joseph May, a supporter of the school, broke the news that there was no choice but to close. Later, he said, "The words almost blistered my lips. My heart glowed with indignation. I felt ashamed for Canterbury, shame for Connecticut, and shame for my country."

The state eventually saw the error of its ways and repealed the Black Laws in 1838. In

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Notebook

1886, when Prudence Crandall was living out her years in Kansas, the state granted her a \$400 a year pension as a way of making amends.

Now, there's irony in abundance, as the state attempts to close her school down yet again—or appears that it will. The process continues as I write this. My guess is that the museum will be restored in some way, but even if it is, it won't be supported the way it should be, and it seems unlikely that the rotting clapboard siding will be addressed.

All of this is a big blow to Canterbury. Quite apart from its behavior 170 years ago, the town now embraces Prudence Crandall's legacy, proud that an important civil-rights episode took place there. In fact, the town celebrates its 300th birthday this year, and had planned to do it at the museum. Now it may have to make other arrangements.

Once again, the future of the place is in Hartford's hands. What value, in the end, will the governor and the legislature assign the lessons of such courage? If March budget hearings are any indication, not much.

One by one, passionate defenders of state history testified, including a 7th grader, Trevor Rzcudlo, of Killingly, who argued that if the state can provide financial help to America's richest retailer, Wal-Mart, to build here, it can certainly keep one of its most important historical treasures open. He concluded, "I may be just one person, but I am trying to live Prudence's story by coming here tonight. Prudence's story clearly demonstrated courage, and the power of one."

During the hearings, legislators asked, "How many people visit in a year's time?" Yes, the "how many" question. The answer: 3,500 people a year, adults paying the requisite \$2.50 and children \$1.50. Total attendance is about 7 percent that of The Mark Twain House, less than 1 percent of Mystic Seaport. Rycenga points out that historical museums, too, have a great impact on tourism. But she is reluctant to rely too heavily on this point. It cheapens the argument.

Sometimes Kaz Kozlowski wonders if she is pushing a very large rock up a mountain. But the children change her mind. The museum was always a destination for school field trips, and on these occasions, Kozlowski is often reminded of the value of such trips. After a recent tour for sixth graders, she asked if there were any questions or comments. "The cutest little girl grabbed my sleeve. She said, 'Prudence made a decision and went against what everyone else thought. I have some friends. They want to go to the gravel bank and smoke. I would rather not, but it's been hard to say no. You know what? I'm going to remember what Prudence did.'"

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