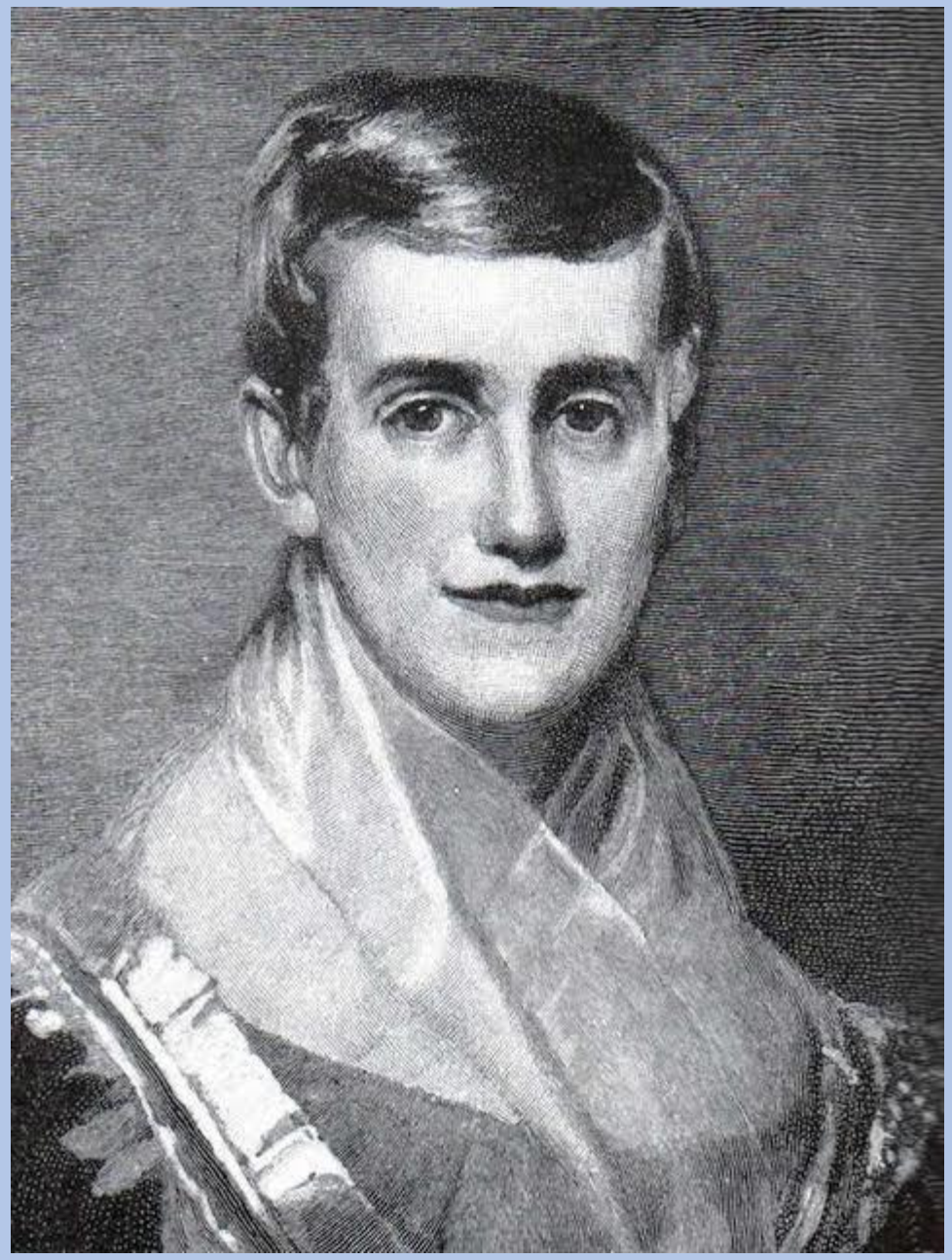
Prudence Crandall (1803-1890)

Fought not only for equal educational opportunities for girls, but equal educational opportunities for black people, in the 1830s when such attitudes among white people were rare.



"I said in my heart, here are my convictions. What shall I do? Shall I be inactive and permit prejudice, the mother of abominations, to remain undisturbed? Or shall I venture to enlist in the ranks of those who with the Sword of Truth dare hold combat with prevailing iniquity? I contemplated for a while 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."

-Prudence Crandall

Early life

- Born 3 September 1803 in Rhode Island, United States
- Grew up in a Quaker family, which shaped her views on education and equality
- Educated at boarding school, studying subjects such as maths, science and Latin, which were not typical for women of the period
- Became a teacher
- In 1831 opened a school for girls in Canterbury, Connecticut: at first it taught girls from the wealthiest families, and was ranked as one of the state’s best schools

A school for Black girls

- In 1832 Crandall was asked, and agreed, to accept a new pupil into her school: Sarah Harris, who hoped to become a teacher, was African American
- This move caused controversy in the town: white parents complained and withdrew their children
- In response, Crandall decided to open a school for Black girls, supported by abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Samuel J. May (the former advertised her school in his abolitionist newspaper)
- One prominent white resident claimed that the school would encourage "social equality and intermarriage of whites and blacks.“ To this, Crandall responded that Moses had a Black wife.

Opposition to the school in Canterbury

- Students venturing outside of school were met with taunts and threats of violence; some were pelted with eggs, stones or manure
- Townspeople closed their shops and meeting houses to Crandall and her students
- Stagecoach drivers refused to transport them
- Doctors refused to treat them
- The school's well – its only water source – was poisoned with manure
- Throughout all this, Crandall refused to give in, and continued to teach

The “Black Law”

- In 1833 a bill was enacted by the Connecticut Legislature forbidding the establishment of schools for non-resident African Americans without local authorities’ consent
- Crandall was arrested under this law and spent a night in jail, refusing to be bailed out as she wanted the public to know that she was being jailed
- Eventually the case was dismissed on a technicality (Crandall kept on teaching while waiting for the case to come to trial)

Closure of the school

- On the night of 9 September 1834, a mob, angry at the dismissal of the case against Prudence Crandall, attacked the school, breaking most of the windows and smashing furniture
- It was only then – after her life and the lives of her students had been threatened – that Crandall closed the school
- Shortly afterwards she married the Reverend Calvin Phillio and moved to Illinois

Further acts of rebellion

- In Illinois, Crandall opened another school in her home
- She became involved in the suffrage movement and continued to fight for the rights of women
- She separated from her husband after he became abusive

Later life, death and beyond

- In 1886, Mark Twain and other important figures successfully campaigned for Crandall to receive an annuity from the Connecticut Legislature
- Crandall died on 27 January 1890
- In 1995, she was designated as Connecticut’s State Heroine

Resources

- Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame. "Prudence Crandall". https://www.cwhf.org/inductees/prudence-crandall
- Davis, Angela Y. (1983). *Women, Race and Class*. London: Penguin.
- Michals, Debra. "Prudence Crandall." National Women's History Museum. 2015. www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/prudence-crandall.

NOTE

I am aware that I’ve chosen to spotlight a white person in the context of the campaign against slavery and civil rights movement.

My intention wasn’t to minimise the contributions of Black people in this movement such as Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells and Sojourner Truth, but, as a white person who strives to be an ally, to learn about and promote the actions of a historical white person who fought for the rights of a community not her own in the face of almost universal opposition and criticism.