

MODULE IV:

The Struggle over Black Citizenship and Inclusion—The 1830s

Introduction: In response to the opening of a boarding school in Canterbury for young ladies of color in April 1833, the Connecticut General Assembly passed a law the following May. The General Assembly prohibited black persons from entering the state for schooling if they resided outside of Connecticut's boundaries. Advocates and proponents of the law vehemently spoke out defending their views, revealing the depth of the challenge African Americans in Connecticut confronted as they pursued full citizenship.

1. Education:

- The white citizens of Connecticut asserted, by their actions, that America was a republic established for the benefit of white people—men in particular—and that black people were never intended to be a part of the polity as citizens. Therefore they were entitled to share in its rights, privileges, and institutions only in so far as white citizens decided. This included access to public education.
- Black Americans argued that they were free, native-born, tax-paying residents of the state and were thereby citizens and entitled to share in the rights and duties of the state. To exclude people of color from citizenship and from full access to public and private education was to violate the highest ideals of the Declaration of Independence as well as the provisions of the federal Constitution. African Americans, like their countrymen, viewed education as vital to securing full citizenship in the United States.

In late 1831 a Baptist school teacher, Prudence Crandall, opened an academy in Canterbury for young women. Properly chartered by the town leaders, her school was intended for young women of the local society and would have served them exclusively if not for a request for admission in September 1832 from a young lady of color, Sarah

Harris. Sarah had, until then, been attending the Canterbury-area public school without incident. As other parents learned of her admission, they voiced their discontent to Crandall. Some withdrew their daughters from the academy. Despite the threat this posed to the financial health of the academy, Crandall maintained Sarah's enrollment. The escalating situation caused Crandall to seek out information on the abolitionist movement then emerging in Boston and New York City. In early 1833, she met with William Lloyd Garrison, leader of the movement in Boston, who encouraged her to consider instead a boarding school in Canterbury exclusively for young ladies of African descent. Crandall, increasingly persuaded by abolitionist principles that slavery and prejudice were the most horrible of sins and that all people should live as equals in America, had determined by February 1833 to close her current school and re-open it the following April as a boarding school for young women of color only. Garrison publicized the school in his antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*. The New Haven merchant and philanthropist, Arthur Tappan, offered to assist in the funding of such an undertaking, and a Unitarian minister, Rev. Samuel May (in neighboring Brooklyn, CT) gave Crandall staunch moral support. When the doors of the new academy opened in April 1833, only two students were on hand. Yet by June, their numbers would increase to nearly twenty young women, recruited from Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York as well.

Black Americans in Connecticut and throughout the land placed a tremendous value on education. The ability to read, to write, to work with numbers--these were the keys that opened the door to the best that life had to offer in nineteenth-century America. To dedicate one's life to learning and to the improvement of intellect were the shining

badges of freedom, made all the more precious because of the legacy of slavery which had, by law, snatched literacy and education away from an enslaved population. In America of that period, an educated citizen was revered as a well-informed, responsible, independent member of the nation: well prepared to raise a strong family. Sadly, opportunities for public education were often very limited for black Americans since most schools were not open to them. Those schools that admitted black students were commonly segregated and grossly lacked textbooks, research materials, supplies and learning opportunities often available to white students. Thus the launching of Prudence Crandall's academy was a particularly noteworthy event.

White residents of Canterbury and beyond feared that the town would be flooded with young black women from the Northeast, coming to the academy for an education. Perhaps they might remain and establish households in the town after their schooling was complete. Too many of the town residents, however, did not believe in equality among all mankind. They did not want to live on equal terms as neighbors or citizens with Afro-descendent people.

2. Political Rights:

- Pre-Civil War notions of American citizenship were based on residency in a particular state. The state, however, was entitled to regulate the manner in which that citizenship was expressed: by voting, by serving in the military, by serving on juries, and by apportioning local taxes. The state was also entitled to bar non-citizens from voting. It was on this basis that Connecticut disfranchised black Americans in the State Constitution of 1818.
- Black Americans argued that they are free, native-born, tax-paying residents of the state and were, therefore, citizens entitled to share in the rights and duties of the state. To deny them the vote was unconstitutional. In the American democracy, an educated citizenry was championed as the greatest defense against manipulation by dangerous demagogues and tyrants. To impede black Americans'

access to education was to prevent them from becoming well-informed citizens capable of exercising responsibly the right to suffrage

The civic status of African Americans in the United States by the 1830s was, unfortunately, not well defined except for those still enslaved in the South. Although all the northern states had abolished slavery by the 1830s, *nowhere* were black Americans definitively recognized as fully enfranchised citizens. While the federal government was required by the Constitution to guarantee “a republican form of government” to every state in the Union, the assignment of citizenship and the manner in which its various privileges would be exercised were left almost exclusively to the determination of each state. *One became a citizen of the nation by being a citizen of a particular state.* After the Civil War and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, the federal government would become much more explicitly identified as the source of citizenship and the guarantor of its privileges and duties. Many Americans in the 1830s agreed with Canterbury’s Arthur Judson that black people were never intended to be citizens by the authors of the Constitution and that America “belongs to a race of white men.” To admit black Americans into the ranks of New World citizens was, they bickered, to plot “the destruction of our Constitution.”

The controversy over Prudence Crandall’s academy highlighted the uncertainty of the civil status of African Americans. While no statute acknowledged black Americans as citizens of the state, a provision in the 1818 State Constitution restricted them from voting. Because black men did not vote, no political official had to be concerned with their opinions and judgments. Thus it was easy for the attorney and town leader, Arthur Judson, and others from Canterbury to appeal to the prejudices of legislators. They secured passage in May 1833 of a law preventing black persons from other states entering

Connecticut to attend a school. Without benefit of sufficient, personal contact with black Americans of similar outlook, many in the state believed malicious gossip and myth which undercut black American character and morality. Fear spread that if people of color were allowed to come to Connecticut, supposedly for education, they would remain in the state as a continuing disturbance and financial burden for the general citizenry. Black Americans were routinely prevented from serving on juries. In Canterbury, this fact allowed local citizens to be more comfortable with intimidating Crandall and her black female students. The Canterbury townsfolk brazenly vandalized the Crandall house and property because, even if they were arrested by the local constabulary (which was unlikely), a jury of their peers would never call for a conviction.

African Americans in the state continued to protest these laws and to pursue education. Black Americans submitted petitions calling for the repeal of the Black Laws of May 1833. They petitioned repeatedly throughout the years prior to the Civil War for an end to their disfranchisement. They even demanded that any black persons accused in Connecticut of being fugitives and threatened with a return to slavery in the South be afforded a full trial with a jury which included black individuals. Although they were not acknowledged as citizens by the state, blacks still asserted themselves politically as best they could and sought to secure full citizenship.

3. Community Formation

- People gain a deep sense of identity from belonging to a settled community. Key to nurturing that identity in antebellum America was possessing the power to choose community leaders and to influence community laws and policies. The local residents of Canterbury and other towns in antebellum Connecticut had this identification and power.

- The residents of Canterbury and other towns in Connecticut viewed black Americans as permanent transients. The communities black populations did manage to form were likely to be misjudged as gathering places for marginal people.

- Black Americans contended that the creation of devout, hard-working, educated communities they had formed was the foundation of their dedication to republicanism and thus their entitlement to inclusion in the nation- state as citizens. Having the right to an education was deemed particularly important. Black Americans before and after the Canterbury crisis fought for greater access to public education, especially in New Haven and Hartford. Black people throughout the state enhanced their local communities with churches, private schools, small businesses, temperance and moral improvement societies, suffrage associations, women's auxiliaries, and literary societies.

The local residents of Canterbury viewed the town as *their* community and they wanted to control its governance. They had various means for doing so: they could elect representatives to its local Board of Selectmen; they could elect legislators to the state's General Assembly; they could elect the Governor and other important state officials. The Selectmen and the citizens could make decisions about public education in the town, about where and what someone might build in the town, about the apportionment of taxes, and even about who might live in the town, especially if the person in question was impoverished. The residents of Connecticut had exercised this form of local control ever since it was settled in the 1630s by Puritans from the Massachusetts Bay Colony who clearly valued organizing the colony around the local Congregational church at each town's center. Two hundred years later in 1833, the Congregational church was still the center of Canterbury and the residents were rightfully very proud of the control and heritage it represented.

Very few black people lived in Canterbury in 1833 or in the vast majority of other towns in the state. As slavery was ending in Connecticut in the late eighteenth century

and the years after 1800, many emancipated African Americans left the rural areas of the state where work was very irregular and property difficult to buy and migrated to larger towns and cities or left the state altogether. By the 1830s, most residents of Canterbury had had little contact with black Americans. Their understanding of African Americans was shaped by the few who lived on the town's margins and performed menial labor or by the occasional black laborer who might stay in town for temporary work such as harvesting or other farm work. Most of these residents believed that black Americans, although now released from slavery, still bore a legacy of degradation from that history. These fears fuelled Canterbury's opposition to the Crandall academy. In the absence of any local black community, these fears remained unchallenged.

Yet by the 1830s, African Americans in Connecticut had in fact formed large and dynamic communities in several of the larger cities including New Haven, Hartford, New London, and Middletown. These communities had established leaders who created churches, private schools, small businesses, temperance, antislavery, and moral improvement societies. A number of black residents owned homes and property, had steady, adequate incomes and provided capably for their families. Well established black communities did exist in Connecticut in the 1830s and African Americans boasted of them proudly as evidence of a commitment to the state and to the duties of good citizens.

The fundamental cornerstone of vitality and virtuousness of these black communities was good schooling. Unfortunately, public schools for black youngsters in cities of the 1830s, if they did exist, were commonly segregated and commonly lacked basic textbooks, library materials, or supplies. Thus Crandall's academy and its rigorous standards were applauded by black leaders throughout the state, even though the school

could serve only a handful of students. Many men in these communities used the strength they found in their settled numbers to protest the Black Laws used to prevent black Americans from attending the school in Canterbury.

4. Respectability:

- Respectability embodied a collection of traits which were imitated and highly valued among Americans of this era. Visible signs of respectability included: piety, temperate conduct, modest dress, a dedication to education and to self improvement, marriage and the establishment of healthy nuclear families, owning property, the creation of a stable homestead and clear contributions to community service and growth. Fostering respectability was critical to promoting a strong, democratic society built on the backs of good citizens. All black leaders in antebellum Connecticut promoted this respectability among their followers. They sought to build institutions and family life within their communities which would be a shining testament to that respectability.
- A loud voice in antebellum America protested that people of African descent were incapable of leading lives grounded in respectability and were a people rendered damaged not only by their enslavement but also *by their very nature*. They were thus justifiably excluded from the life of the citizen in America.

The residents of Canterbury considered themselves a people of respectability.

They were rightfully very proud of their town. They pursued policies which they had fashioned which were intended to promote economic and moral advance of the town. Most attended church, supported the town's public schools, and participated in its governance--if they were male. The town was led by men such as Arthur Judson: esteemed gentlemen of property and standing. Most heads of families owned their homes and property. A woman's place was in these homes, nurturing husbands and children. In these homesteads, family members learned such key democratic values as toleration, compromise, and self-control.

Canterbury residents feared that an influx of African Americans into the town would disrupt the balance of this respectability. They claimed in a petition to the General Assembly in May 1833 that African Americans are “an appalling source of crime & pauperism” and that our town must be protected “from that host of coloured emigrants, which would rush in from every quarter when invited to our colleges and schools.” Blacks “have seldom any settled establishments in their own states” and they would then choose to stay in Canterbury and introduce “imminent evils” which would destroy the town and its respectability. Many feared that even if black people were provided an education and an opportunity to settle in a town with their families, they would still introduce immorality and dissipation into the community.

Many in antebellum New England embraced the webs of falsehoods, gossip, myths and stereotypes constructed out of ignorance and unfamiliarity, which engulfed people of African descent, portraying them as fundamentally different. The existence of over two million impoverished and uneducated enslaved black people in the South in the 1830s seemed to substantiate this opinion. The era’s very popular minstrel shows contributed immensely to fueling this unfair representation of black Americans by drawing attention and ridicule to a parade of race-based caricatures. In this atmosphere, the citizens of Canterbury believed they were only protecting the "integrity" of their town by seeking to ban Crandall’s academy.

Despite this grim and popular misunderstanding of African Americans, black leaders in antebellum Connecticut promoted respectability among their people and attempted to build institutions and family life within their own communities which would produce respectability. They asserted that the presence of this respectability

among black Americans would ensure their fuller inclusion in America. In New Haven, Middletown, and Hartford, black communities had their own churches and societies promoting education, temperance, and moral improvement. Marriage rates were high among adult African Americans. Against formidable odds, black parents sought proper public schools for their children. While poverty commonly plagued the lives of antebellum blacks, interfering with their ability to become property owners and to provide adequately for their families, many nevertheless aspired to respectability and to the recognition from the state and the nation that would surely follow. Supporting the establishment of Prudence Crandall's academy and petitioning for the repeal of the Black Laws only highlighted the dedication of Connecticut's African Americans to the values and ideals of respectability.

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