

Frederick Olney

When the New London Maritime Society received the recent gift of a 19th Century mariner's journal, they knew that they had received something very special. The journal was from the whaler Merrimac which sailed out of New London in the 1840s and 1850s.

But, since the journal's author was not initially identified, they had no way of knowing just how 'special' this gift would turn out to be. "Special" does not nearly do justice to the importance of this find: 'phenomenal' would be more accurate, and, even at that, it is still something of an understatement.

Why 'phenomenal'? Let me count the ways. 1) It is a first person account of a series of voyages written near the height of the whaling industry on a New London whaler; 2) it is the journal of a Black whaler, a long-overlooked subject of increasing interest to historians, especially in the light of the current focus on the untold stories Black history; 3) now that Frederick Olney has been identified as the author, we can link this journal to one of the most significant events in Connecticut --- and American! ---- history: the Prudence Crandall Female Boarding School in Canterbury, Connecticut 1832-34!

And it doesn't end there!

Frederick Olney was not only a significant part of the Crandall School story, but he was also related by marriage to the remarkable Harris family. In 1844, Frederick married Olive Smith Harris, the younger sister of Sarah Harris, who was the first Black student at Crandall's Boarding School. The Harris family, originally from Norwich and Canterbury, was active in the movement for abolition, Black suffrage, civil rights and education from as early as 1817. At least two of the Harris sisters and their families were residents of New London in the 1840s.

This story could not have come at a more opportune moment: the City of New London, in collaboration with New London Landmarks is developing a Black Heritage Walking Trail, scheduled for completion this summer. One of the 15 sites on the Trail is dedicated to Sarah Harris Fayerweather, who lived on Broad Street in New London with her husband George and their growing family from 1841 to 1855. While in New London they were active in issues of civil rights, suffrage, abolition and the Underground Railroad. Yet their presence here is virtually unknown. Celinda Harris Anderson, one of Sarah's sisters, also lived in New London, and with her husband William, was also active in the issues noted above. This was also around the time that Ichabod Pease established his school for Black children in New London, which is also on the Heritage Trail. We are currently exploring any possible connections between Pease and the Harris sisters. His plaque has already been installed on the site of his school.

As mentioned above, Frederick Olney was married to a third Harris sister, Olive Smith Harris. They were relative newlyweds at the time of the Merrimac voyage. This journal potentially adds a whole new dimension to what we know of the Black community in New London and the surrounding area in the 1840s.

The account that was given in the Maritime Society announcement last week contained a couple of minor errors regarding Frederick Olney and his involvement in the Crandall school incident. I would like to take a moment to clarify those issues in order to better appreciate the important role he played at the school, as well as his important place in Connecticut history.

Olney lived in Norwich, and was a friend of Sarah's brother, Charles Harris, and Charles' fiancée, Ann Maria Davis, who was a household employee of Prudence Crandall. He was contacted by the mother of Gloriana Catherine Marshall, one of the students at the school, who asked him to deliver a package to her daughter in Canterbury. A previous package that she had sent by normal post had failed to arrive. Frederick agreed to deliver the package, and promised to send a letter to the mother as soon as it was delivered to confirm the delivery. He did deliver the package, and wrote a note to the mother, while still at the school, as promised. During his visit that day, he happened to notice that a clock was not working properly. So he took down the clock and started to fix it. It was at that moment that smoke was detected by one of the girls in the house. Olney traced the source of the smoke to a fire in the walls and floor, and immediately took steps to extinguish the fire. This was shortly after the townspeople of Canterbury had made physical threats against the school. The fire was put out and, luckily, no one was seriously injured.

A few days later, Olney was back in Norwich at a barber shop, and was approached by two men from Canterbury. They questioned him about the fire, and then they arrested him, charging him with arson. At his trial, the young students bravely testified in his defense in front of a hostile courtroom, and the mother came from New York to also testify in his behalf. Their testimony gave a complete accounting of all of his activities that day, as well as establishing the high regard in which he was held. The evidence of his innocence was so overwhelming that it took the all-white jury less than 15 minutes to acquit him. Although it was determined that the fire was set by an arsonist from outside the building, no one else was ever prosecuted for the crime. The prosecution had tried--- and failed--- to implicate Prudence Crandall and Frederick Olney in setting the fire to gain publicity and public sympathy. Frederick Olney was, in fact, the hero who saved the school, and the despicable effort to frame him as the arsonist was a shameful miscarriage of justice. It speaks to the bigotry of the time, and the desperate measures to which the townspeople of Canterbury were apparently willing to resort, to stop Crandall's school. And it resonates today as we continue to strive for justice and equity.

There is much more that could be written here about this story, and we will start to see some of that story revealed in the coming months, as New London's Black Heritage Trail is unveiled. Most of the above information is from Susan Strane's biography of Prudence Crandall "A Whole-Souled Woman", which I recommend for further information. I am also grateful to Joan DiMartino, the Director of the Prudence Crandall Museum, for sharing her information with me. I would further strongly recommend a couple of video presentations by Dr. Jennifer Rycenga that are available on Youtube. Dr. Rycenga is arguably the foremost authority on Crandall and her school, and she is very interested in the Olney journal, also. She is presently writing a book

on the Crandall school, with the focus on the students of the school, about which very little has been written. They are heroes also. We eagerly await the publication of her book, and there is no doubt that her scholarship will shed even more light on this fascinating period of American history.

As an amateur local historian and New London native, I can't tell you how excited I am to learn about this Merrimac journal. This is a 'win' on so many fronts! Huge congratulations to the New London Maritime Society, particularly Susan Tamulevich and Laurie Deredita, along with grateful thanks to Edwina Owens Badger and all who helped to bring this treasure back home to New London. And I would be remiss if I failed to mention that engaging the 'citizen scribes' in the transcription of the journal was an absolute stroke of genius! Kudos!

Tom Schuch

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