

# Introduction

The student of social history who may be seeking to know the experiences of the Negro scholar in nineteenth-century America would do well to consider Alexander Crummell. In his life so many of the broad social trends are reflected; so few of the struggles and triumphs of the Negro intellectual are missed. Nevertheless, there are two distinct variations from the norm: Crummell was never a slave, nor did he ever formally enter the abolition movement. He was religious rather than political, although when aroused he was an unfailing champion of his people.

Alexander Crummell, A.B., D.D., LL.D., was born on March 3, 1819, in New York City. His father, Boston Crummell, was the son of a West African chief in Timanee. On his maternal side, Crummell's ancestors had been free residents in New York for generations. At the age of thirteen, he entered the Mulberry Street School. In this Quaker establishment, the youngster met as schoolmates several bright, young minds who later were to merit mention: Patrick Reason, the engraver; Charles L. Reason, of the faculty of Central College; Ira Aldridge, the actor; James McCune Smith, who won his M.D. from the University of Glasgow, Scotland; Samuel Ringgold War who, like Lemuel Haynes, served as the pastor of a white congregation; and Henry Highland Garnet, the learned and militant abolitionist. Garnet proved to be a leader of this group of Negro students.

In 1831, Crummell and Garnet, among others, entered the high school established for Negro youth by Rev. Peter Williams. The next move came in 1835, when the abolitionists of New Hampshire made the radical departure of opening a school to all races and sexes. Accordingly, the young scholars enthusiastically embraced the opportunity and journeyed to the town of Canaan. However, the "silver lining" was soon chased away by clouds of prejudice and anger. Ironically, on the 4th of July the farmers and townspeople resolved to destroy the "abolition nest." A month later they hitched some ninety yoke of oxen to the schoolhouse and dragged it into the middle of a swamp. One night the very house in which the boys lived was attacked. Canaan turned out to be not quite "Canaan" after all.

Forced to leave New Hampshire, Crummell spent the next three years, 1836–1839, at the Oneida Institute, a manual training school at Whitesboro, New York. The young scholar, in due course, applied for admission to the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church. Again, he met the color bar. Moreover, Crummell appealed the decision to the board of trustees of the institution. For this audacity, "Bishop Onderdonk sent for me and . . . set upon me with a violence and grossness that I never since encountered, save in one instance in Africa." Crummell became, henceforth, figuratively a marked man.

In contrast, there were those who rose to his defense. William Jay and John Jay, son and grandson of the John Jay who was the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, protested the action of the seminary. They and others assisted the student to Boston, where he met the venerable Bishop Griswold, who received him warmly. In retrospect, Crummell could write: "My removal from New York to Boston seemed a transition from the darkness of midnight to the golden light of a summer morning. . . . Just think of a simple black boy, in 1840 being received in the very Mecca of American culture, refinement, and piety, with courtesy and manly recognition, with Christian fraternalism!" In May 1842 he was ordained to the diaconate; two years later, to the priesthood.

Crummell was now a full-fledged Episcopal minister. He took his first charge in Providence, Rhode Island, and moved next to Philadelphia. Here he again encountered an Onderdonk—the New York bishop’s brother—but it was the same color bar. To make matters worse, his congregations found his sermons very dry. His appeal was to the intellect rather than to the emotions. He nearly starved. Tired and depressed, he returned to his native New York.

In 1847, at the solicitation of John Jay and others, he visited England for a rest and to raise funds for a church in New York. He remained for five glorious years. During this time he studied for two years at Queen’s College, Cambridge University, and received the bachelor’s degree in 1853. He preached and lectured all over the British Isles and was friendly with high churchmen and such great names as Thackeray and Macaulay.

In England, Crummell’s spirit may have blossomed but not his health. His physician insisted upon a warmer climate. Thus, in 1853, weak and worn, he landed in Liberia, the Negro Republic of West Africa, where the healthful climate gave him back his strength and energy. He remained there for twenty years as missionary and teacher. He served on the faculty of Liberia College and made extensive journeys into Sierra Leone. As ever, he steered clear of politics.

In 1873, Crummell returned to the United States. In Washington, DC, he founded St. Luke’s Church, where he served as rector for nearly twenty-two years. In 1895 he resigned at seventy-six years of age. Despite the shadows of his declining years, he established on March 5, 1897, a significant cultural society—the American Negro Academy. This congress of Negro scholars of science and literature has included such men as John W. Cromwell, Francis and Archibald Grimke, Kelly Miller, Henry P. Slaughter, and A. A. Schomburg. The end came swiftly afterward. Crummell died on September 10, 1898, at Point Pleasant, New Jersey. He was buried from St. Philip’s Church in New York City.

Paul Laurence Dunbar’s laudatory poem, “Alexander Crummell—Dead,” was published in *The Colored American* and reprinted in many other periodicals. Crummell was described by his contemporaries as tall, refined, and dignified, a brilliant conversationalist with a rich baritone voice. He believed in self-discipline and the so-called Yankee virtues. His public and private life were kept so separate that most biographers forget to mention that he was married and had several children.

The published works of Crummell, perceived as a graceful writer and literary scholar, include numerous essays, pamphlets, and three books: *The Future of Africa; Being Addresses, Sermons, etc., Delivered in the Republic of Liberia* (1862); *The Greatness of Christ and Other Sermons* (1882); and *Africa and America; Addresses and Discourses* (1891). This latter work contains the notable “Defense of the Negro Race,” which has been termed a final and crushing answer to the Rev. J. J. Tucker, D.D., a Negrophobe Episcopal clergyman of Jackson, Mississippi. This volume also contains what proved to be Crummell’s most unpopular lecture, “Common Sense in Common Schooling.” The pamphlet, “The Black Woman of the South; Her Neglects and Her Needs,” has a circulation of 500,000 copies.

The manuscripts of the Crummell Collection, in their fullness and number, illuminate the life and labor of this distinguished man. Happily for the reader, his handwriting is thoroughly legible. More than most Negro Americans of his century, the life of Alexander Crummell is available to the historian and biographer.