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Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,  
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

**Alexander Crummell papers**

1837-1898

Sc Micro R-1004

## Summary

**Creator:** Crummell, Alexander, 1819-1898

**Title:** Alexander Crummell papers

**Date:** 1837-1898

**Size:** 11 reels

**Source:** Gift of Arthur A. Schomburg.

**Abstract:** Clergyman, teacher, missionary. Letters addressed to Crummell discussing personal and religious interests and Crummell's missionary work as an Episcopalian in Liberia in the 1850s through 1860s. Bulk of the collection consists of numerous sermons preached in Washington, D.C. and other American cities, England, and Liberia. Sermons, in addition to discussing religious matters, concern his work in Liberia, the role of the family, and other subjects.

**Preferred citation:** [Item], Alexander Crummell papers, Sc Micro R-1004, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

**Language of the Material:** English

## Creator History

Alexander Crummell, clergyman, teacher and missionary, was born on March 3, 1819, in New York City. His father, Boston Crummell, had been born in Africa in what later became Sierra Leone. On his maternal side, Crummell's ancestors had been free residents in New York for generations. At the age of thirteen, he entered the African Free School on Mulberry Street. His schoolmates in this Quaker establishment included several bright, young men who would also distinguish themselves: 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 Ward who, like Lemuel Haynes, served as the pastor of a white congregation; and Henry Highland Garnet, the learned and militant abolitionist.

In 1831, Crummell and Garnet, among others, entered the Canal Street 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 (Noyes Academy) for 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 the swamp. One night the very house in which the boys lived was attacked.

Forced to leave New Hampshire, Crummell spent the next three years (1836-1839) at the Oneida Institute in Whitesboro, New York. Having decided on a career in the ministry, he applied for admission to the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church on the advice of his rector Rev. Peter Williams of St. Philip's Church. Again, he met the color bar. However, 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 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 and John Jay, son and grandson of the first Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court, protested the action of the seminary. They, and others, helped Crummell get to Boston, where he met the venerable Bishop Griswold, who received him warmly. In retrospect, Crummell would 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 took his first charge as an Episcopalian minister in Providence, Rhode Island, and moved next to Philadelphia. Here he again encountered an Onderdonk — the New York bishop's brother, and was refused admission to the Diocese of Pennsylvania. To make matters worse, his congregations found his sermons dry; his appeal being to the intellect rather than to the emotions. Tired and depressed, he returned to his native New York where he organized a congregation of poor, hardworking Negroes.

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 in England for five 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 men as William Thackeray and Thomas Macaulay. While in England his health suffered, and his physician insisted he move to 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.

Crummell remained in Liberia for twenty years as a missionary and teacher, and became a citizen of the new republic. He performed his missionary labors in almost every corner of the country, establishing several churches. Together, with Edward Blyden, a close associate, he became a formulator and spokesman of Liberian nationalism. In 1858 he became a master of Mount Vaughan High School at Cape Palmas, and, in 1861 he was appointed to the faculty of the new Liberia College. After his dismissal in 1866 from his position at the college over longstanding differences with the administration, Crummell established a school modeled on the Oneida Institute. Political strife in Liberia eventually forced him to leave the country, and in 1872, Crummell returned to the United States. He settled in Washington, D. C. where he founded St. Luke's Church, and served as its rector for nearly twenty-two years, in 1883 he was instrumental in establishing the Conference of Church Workers among Colored People within the Episcopal Church.

In 1895, Crummell resigned from St. Luke's at seventy-six years of age. Despite the shadows of his declining years, he taught at Howard University from 1895 to 1897, and on March 5, 1897, established a significant cultural society — the American Negro Academy. This congress of Negro scholars of science and literature included such men as John W. Cromwell, Francis and Archibald Grimke, Kelly Miller, Henry P. Slaughter, and Arthur A. Schomburg, its last president,

Crummell died on September 10, 1898, at Red Bank, New Jersey, and was buried from St. Philip's Church in New York City, in the church's cemetery. He was survived by his wife, Jennie M. Simpson, and several children.

The published works of Alexander Crummell, perceived as a graceful writer and literary scholar, include numerous essays, pamphlets, and sermons, including: *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*, had a circulation of 500,000.

Like many men of his era and circumstance, Crummell played a prominent role in the antislavery crusade. He was active in the Negro Convention Movement, and at the Albany Convention in 1840 drafted the petition to the New York state legislature seeking removal of restrictions against the Negroes' right to vote. At the 1847 National Convention in Troy, NY, he joined James McCune Smith in recommending the establishment of Negro colleges. These activities were, nevertheless secondary to his religious duties, and he would later write that concern for politics wasted valuable energy that could be more effectively directed toward "mental and moral improvement". Despite that opinion, Crummell became a frequent lecturer as disfranchisement and segregation spread across the country during the 1880s and 1890s. Significantly his lectures stressed the need for "educated Negroes to lead in the redemption of the race".

Crummell was also instrumental in establishing a tradition of Negro scholarship. Before him there had been "little consistent, systematic body of scholarly Negro thought". A "public teacher" on three continents, he played an important role in determining the parameters and "rhetoric of key issues affecting Negroes: the nature of black leadership, the kind of education best suited to the needs of the race, the efficacy of participation in politics, and the relationship of Afro-Americans to Africa". Perhaps more than others, Alexander Crummell was "responsible for the precedent of putting scholarship to the service of Negro protest and advancement".

Biography prepared by L. D. Reddick, ca. 1942. Revised and edited 1998.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The Alexander Crummell Papers illuminate the life and labor of this distinguished man, and consist of Letters and Sermons.

## **Key Terms**

**Occupations**

African American clergy  
African American missionaries

**Subjects**

African American Episcopalians  
African American families  
African Americans -- Religion  
Families  
Missions -- Liberia

**Geographic Names**

England -- Religious life and customs  
Liberia -- Religious life and customs  
United States -- Religious life and customs

**Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Sermons

**Names**

Crummell, Alexander, 1819-1898

## Container List

### Crummell letters

Arranged alphabetically by correspondent.

- r. 1 A
- r. 1 B
- r. 1 C
- r. 1 D
- r. 1 E
- r. 1 F
- r. 1 G
- r. 1 H
- r. 1 J
- r. 1 K
- r. 1 1
- r. 1 M
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- r. 1 O
- r. 1 P
- r. 1 Q
- r. 1 R
- r. 1 S
- r. 1 T
- r. 1 V
- r. 1 W
- r. 1 X
- r. 2 Crummell to J. E. Bruce in Albany, New York 1890 - 1898  
Includes 27 items.

### Crummell sermons

Consists of manuscripts and, when available, the printed version of the sermons, filed numerically.

- r. 3 Index to Crummell manuscripts
- r. 3 Nos. 2-14
- r. 3 Nos. 15-27
- r. 3 No. 28
- r. 3 Nos. 29-35
- r. 4 Nos. 36-41
- r. 4 Nos. 42-45
- r. 4 No. 46
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Crummell sermons (cont.)

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Crummell sermons (cont.)

- r. 10 No. 351-400
- r. 11 No. 401-412