

Stephen Crane

**The
Making of
New Jersey's
Literary Rebel**

By Donna Troppoli

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Stephen Crane, American author, poet and journalist was born in Newark in 1871, and spent much of his youth in New Jersey. He was proud of his origins and was quoted as having said: “The family is founded deep in Jersey soil . . . and I am about as much of a Jerseyman as you can find.” Ernest Hemingway referred to him as a “good writer” of the caliber of Mark Twain and Henry James. Although his literary and journalistic career compelled him to travel widely, his first contacts with professional writers were the members of his own family. Mentored by an older brother, he learned the craft of journalism in coastal Monmouth County. These influences, in addition to his reaction against the strictures of Methodism, his largely unsupervised youth, and his insistence on personal experience as the basis for his writing, provided a foundation for the realistic style that would influence 20th Century American literature.

Family History and Holiness

The history of colonial and revolutionary New Jersey would be incomplete without the exploits of Stephen Crane’s ancestors, who were involved in the settlement of colonial New Jersey, the American Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812. Both of the author’s parents, the Reverend Jonathan Crane and Mary Helen Peck Crane, were influential figures in the Methodist Church, which by the mid-19th Century was the largest Protestant denomination in America.

Jonathan Townley Crane, Stephen’s father, was born in what is now Union, New Jersey in 1819. Although raised as a Presbyterian, he experienced a religious reawakening at age eighteen and converted to Methodism. At age twenty-one he entered The College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). After graduating in 1843, he became an itinerant preacher in New Jersey and New York State.

Mary Helen Peck Crane was the daughter, sister, and niece of Methodist ministers. She was well educated herself, having graduated from The Rutgers Female Institute (founded in 1840 and primarily a normal school located on Fifth Avenue in



Detail of a portrait of John Wesley, by Frank O. Salisbury c.1932.

Manhattan, and not part of Rutgers University) in 1847. When she married in 1848, she was able to provide her husband with clerical connections that helped him to build his ecclesiastical career.

A little background on the Holiness Movement as it relates to 19th Century Methodism in America will help to illustrate exactly what Stephen Crane, in both his life and his work, was rebelling against. John Wesley (1703–1791) is recognized as one of the founders of the Methodist Church, although he remained an Anglican clergyman his entire life and his Methodist movement did not break away until after his death. Wesley encouraged a traveling ministry which reached people by preaching outdoors. His work: *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* was a great influence on American Methodism, and a basis for the Holiness Movement, which began in the 1840s. A core belief of this movement is that in addition to the conversion experience (Justification) which often occurred during revival meetings, the believer would also undergo the complete removal of sin (Sanctification) during a separate religious experience.

The Holiness Movement is considered to be part of the Third Great Awakening, which spanned the late 1850s to about 1900. This period of religious and social activism included the Abolitionist and Prohibition movements in America and was inspired by the belief that the Second Coming of Christ would occur after mankind had perfected the earth. Women were very influential within the Holiness Movement, which also included several other Protestant denominations.

New Jersey was and continues to be the site of much Methodist activity. The first Holiness Camp Meeting was held in Vineland in 1867. Ocean Grove (now a part of Neptune Township) was founded for this purpose in 1869 by Methodist clergymen and still has an active Camp Meeting Association (www.oceangrove.org).

The Methodism that “Stevie” Crane experienced as a minister’s son included the expected regular church attendance and proscriptions on smoking, drinking, and swearing. However, restrictions on dancing and much secular reading material, strict limits on Sunday Sabbath activities, conservative dress and

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behavior, and a generalized intolerance for independent thought were also expected and enforced within his religious community. None of this sat well with his free spirit. At age seven, Stevie Crane bought his first beer from a vendor at a summer festival. He admonished the seller to fill up his glass or return his dime. Having tried the sinful brew he remarked to his young friend (who had already taken the temperance pledge), “Beer ain’t nothing at all . . . how was I going to know what it tasted like less’n I tasted it? How you going to know about things at all less’n you do ‘em?” This personal philosophy was the origin of his experience-driven method of writing.

A Family of Writers

Stephen Crane was not the only member of his household who relied upon writing to inform others and to earn his living. The work of his parents and siblings demonstrates the formative influences they provided for his literary style, personal convictions, and even characters in his fiction.

Jonathan Crane was widely read and wrote prolifically on secular subjects while at university where he was president of one of the literary societies. As Reverend Crane he was obliged to pursue religious topics, which included cautionary tracts about dancing, popular amusements, and drinking. These works illustrated his knowledge and understanding of the culture which existed outside of his religious beliefs; he explained the social implications of dance and the value of classical literature. A respected voice in his church, he authored six books on important religious topics.

But his honesty and open mindedness got him into trouble when he published *Holiness the Birthright of All God’s Children* in 1874. His premise that Justification removed sin from the believer and that Sanctification was not necessary to attain salvation offended the more traditionally minded and less well-educated clergy. His impetus for publishing this work may have been that he himself did not believe he had personally experienced Sanctification. Much like Stephen, he objected to writing about what he had not personally experienced. With the death of his

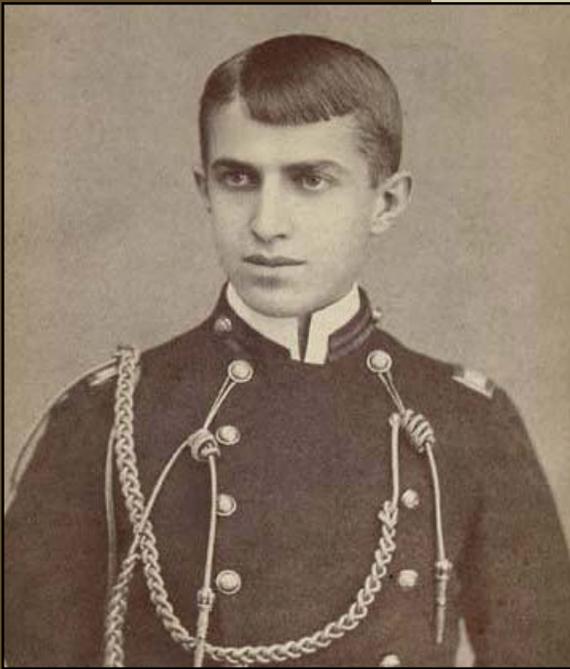
father-in-law, it became difficult for Mary Helen's family to support him against the storm of criticism voiced by both the Methodist clergy and laity. Reverend Crane was demoted from presiding church elder status and was reassigned to a parish in Port Jervis, New York.

Mary Helen Peck Crane was fervent in her Methodist beliefs, but like Stephen also possessed a creative, restless disposition.

After the family's move to Port Jervis she established a small trade school for the town's African-American women. Shortly after moving to Asbury Park in 1883, she was elected to the presidency of the Ocean Grove-Asbury Park Chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). This organization not only fought for the prohibition of alcohol but also advocated expanded legal rights and suffrage for women. Her writings could be found in WCTU and Methodist publications and the *Ocean Grove Record*. Her son, Townley was a professional journalist in the area and likely helped her to become frequently featured in more widely circulated newspapers such as the *New York Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Press*, and the *Monmouth Tribune*. Using the pen name Jerusha Ann Stubbs, Mrs. Crane indulged her playful side with several

short humorous pieces written in a folksy dialect which were printed in local papers. Stephen used a similar technique in pieces such works as: *Uncle Jake and the Bell Handle*, *The Sullivan County Sketches* and his first three novels.

Jonathan Crane, Jr., known to all as "Townley," was a resident of Long Branch before moving to Asbury Park. At the time, Long Branch was the premier Jersey Shore resort and site of the New Jersey Coast News Bureau which supplied local stories for larger metropolitan papers. (Another Crane brother, Wilbur, also worked as a stringer for Townley during his summers in medical school). In 1882, Townley became the editor of the *Asbury Park Shore Press* (which survives today as the *Asbury Park Press*), with an office in Asbury Park. Having suffered the deaths of two wives, the divorce of a third, and loss of his two children within thirteen years, he had become an alcoholic and was known for his eccentric appearance



Stephen Crane in military uniform in 1888 at the age of seventeen.

and behavior which probably resembled today's stereotypical homeless man—unkempt and wearing inappropriately heavy clothing in the summer heat.

There was a wide age difference between Stephen and his surviving brothers and sisters—Mary Helen was 44-years-old

when Stephen was born. His mother's many pursuits outside of the home had left him in the care of his favorite sister, Agnes since the family's move to Port Jervis. Agnes remained unmarried and became a teacher in the Asbury Park school system (1883–1884) upon the family's final relocation. She and Stevie had many things in common, (ironically, both had died at age 28) which included a love of self-expression. Agnes was the first family member to have a



A fire department parade on Front Street in Port Jervis in September of 1903.

<http://www.minisink.org>

piece of fiction published—her short story “The Result of an Experiment” was featured in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* in May 1884, a month before her death from spinal meningitis.

To the Promised Land

Port Jervis had been the Crane family's home from 1878–1883—the longest time Stevie had lived in one place thus far. He was not yet nine when Reverend Crane died in February 1880; this was the impetus for yet another move—this time to Asbury Park. Mrs. Crane was familiar with the city, having previously visited neighboring Ocean Grove during summer stays with Townley. With its strong Methodist connections and proximity to her son, she knew she would find an appropriate home for her and the remaining unmarried members of her family. Financed by a family inheritance, she purchased the house at the present 508 Fourth Avenue—then known as “Arbutus Cottage.”

Asbury Park was founded by James A. Bradley, a Catholic convert to Methodism, in 1871. Bradley and his wife were

childless, and contemporaneous accounts describe him as pursuing the sort of total control over the city, its inhabitants and guests that a strict father might have over his children and home.



Asbury Park's Fifth Avenue Pavilion c.1903.

He would admonish those who lacked the appropriate self-control or mode of dress with handwritten notes. Stevie was a largely unkempt and unsupervised adolescent and he found Mayor Bradley and his city to be an easy mark for his rebelliousness and fodder for characters in future articles and stories.

A Disorderly Education

With the death of Agnes, Mrs. Crane realized that Stephen would require a more disciplined environment; this began his enrollment in a series of boarding schools and colleges. Numerous family connections allowed him more second chances than might normally be expected for a nonconforming youth. In 1885 he was enrolled in Pennington Seminary, a quasi-military school with a Methodist affiliation. (It survives today as the Pennington School.) Reverend Crane had earlier served as its headmaster (1849–1858) and saved it from closure. However the strict religious requirements and accusation of participation in a hazing incident caused Stephen to leave after two years.

Stephen transferred to Claverack College, a co-educational boarding school in New York State, in January 1888, and remained there for the following 2 1/2 years. Mary Helen was able to afford to enroll him there, largely due to a discount available to sons of clergymen. Stephen's happiest adolescent times were spent at Claverack—sleeping in, smoking, playing poker and team sports, and discovering girls. Favoring the history and literature courses in his curriculum, like his father before him, Stephen also

participated in the school's literary societies.

In September 1890, Stephen entered Lafayette College, in Easton, Pennsylvania. Although the school was administered by the Presbyterian Synod, at the time it had a deserved reputation for raucous, underperforming students. Their "pranks" included the destruction of outhouses, destroying classrooms, defacing

the chapel, causing gas explosions, and bringing a horse into campus buildings.

Hazing and rivalries between classes were common; arrests were not. Stephen himself was involved in such campus violence when members of the sophomore class broke into his room. They were met by Stephen holding a pistol, the sight of which ended the confrontation. These disturbances, combined with an unsuitable major in engineering caused Stephen

to leave Lafayette after his first semester.

Stephen's last stop on the collegiate road was Methodist-affiliated Syracuse University, whose founders included his great uncle. Stephen was expected to live with his widowed great aunt, but was soon pledged to Delta Upsilon and moved to the fraternity house. He was said to have arrived there in a cab filled with a cloud of tobacco smoke, which was not a deterrent as many of his frat brothers were also smokers and bohemians. Stephen continued to be an indifferent student, but excelled at baseball.

After failures on several exams, a professor questioned his reason for attending the university. When Stephen admitted an interest in journalism, the professor recommended that he seek employment with the local newspaper; a family connection provided him with the position of Syracuse correspondent for the



Stephen Crane (front row, center) sits with baseball teammates on the steps of the Hall of Languages, Syracuse University, 1891.

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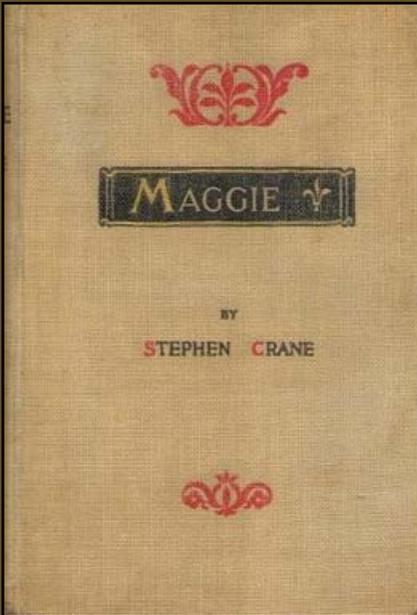
New York Tribune. This enabled Stephen to frequent dance halls, “parlor houses,” police courts, and tenement neighborhoods as sources for his articles. Much of this experience served as the basis for his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, the first draft of which was written at Delta Upsilon House. His formal education was completed in June 1891, when he left Syracuse to pursue journalism exclusively.

Townley’s Stringer

The economic recovery in the North which followed the Civil War enabled the growing American middle class to enjoy summer vacations at shore resorts, an activity once reserved for the rich. Townley’s summer news bureau, which supplied articles to the *New York Tribune*, served to inform and amuse this annual influx of guests. Stephen first began writing for Townley during his summer vacations. Stephen’s pieces were unattributed and included in Townley’s submissions. However, in July 1887 the *Philadelphia Press* published a fictional piece supplied by Townley’s agency written by his 15-year-old brother: *Asbury’s New Move*. This piece, which would later be reworked as *The Pace of Youth*, featured a character based on James Bradley who is offended by the public flirtation of a young man and woman at a summer resort. By 1890, Stephen’s output was so important that Townley put on the payroll and listed him as the secretary of the bureau.

When Stephen needed a vacation, he usually spent it camping with friends in the forests near Port Jervis—the inspiration for his *Sullivan County Tales*. These were enthusiastically received when published in the *New York Tribune* in 1892. He also spent time with his family. His brother Edmund’s home in Passaic County, with its proximity to New York City, allowed Stephen to continue gathering material for *Maggie*.

When Stephen returned to Asbury Park for the summer of 1892, he was becoming disenchanted with the light material he was expected to provide. This was reflected in the satiric style of his writing, which mocked the area’s sanctimonious religious leaders and the social pretensions of the city’s visitors. Even so,



Cover of the 1896 first trade edition of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*.

well-off Americans were developing an interest in the urban poor. In July, Jacob Riis, author of *How the Other Half Lives*, a nonfiction account of life in the slums, gave a lecture in nearby Avon. This event reinforced Stephen's decision to portray life with unvarnished realism.

At this time Stephen also began a romance with Alice "Lily" Munroe. Lily was born to a wealthy New York family and was estranged from her husband (who would later burn most of Stephen's letters, photos, and a manuscript of *Maggie* before they divorced in 1897). Stephen's disheveled appearance, smoker's cough, and apparent lack of prospects did not impress her family, and she refused his offer to elope.

As his father before him, Stephen unwittingly created a controversy that nearly derailed his career—his report of the America Day parade, held by the Junior Order of United American Mechanics (JOUAM). Stephen's intention was to contrast the stuffy, self-satisfied, and well-dressed parade watchers with the sincere but shabbily dressed and amateurish marching and musicianship of the Mechanics. Through an editorial oversight, the unattributed piece was published by the *New York Tribune*. The JOUAM

was enraged at what they perceived as an affront to their patriotism. Whitelaw Reid, owner of the *Tribune* was running for vice-president on Benjamin Harrison's ticket, and needed the labor vote to be competitive in a close election. JOUAM accused him as being anti-labor. As a result both Townley and Stephen were fired. Townley was able to recover as an associate editor of the *Asbury Park Shore Press*. He was later reconciled with Reid (who had lost the election) and returned to the *Tribune* as a reporter. However, Reid did not forgive nor forget Stephen's actions, and the *Tribune* denigrated Crane and his work even after the author's death.



Whitelaw Reid, 1898.

City Lights

In the fall of 1892, Stephen was 21 and would complete his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* that winter. Like so many before and since, Stephen had crossed the river into New York City, the nation's center of journalism and publishing. Mary Helen Peck Crane had died in December 1891. In January 1893, Stephen sold his inheritance: some mining stocks and his share of Arbutus Cottage to his brother William so that he could finance the publication of *Maggie*. When it was finally published, it was under the name "Johnston Smith" so that its raw language and content would not embarrass the religious members of his family.

Stephen would not return to Asbury Park until August 1896 when he wrote his final article about the resort that had been his home. *Asbury Park as Seen by Stephen Crane* was commissioned by the *New York Journal*, the *New York Tribune's* rival. The resulting work by the now famous author of *The Red Badge of Courage* described Mayor Bradley's version of morality as: ". . . define(ing) virtue as a physical inertia and a moral death." Crane's parting shot was biting, ironic, and unsparing.

Crane's peripatetic life took him throughout the United States, Mexico, Cuba, Greece, the British Isles, and finally Germany. It was here that his common law wife, Cora, hoped he would recover from tuberculosis, which claimed his life on June 5, 1900. Stephen Crane is buried in Evergreen Cemetery, Hillside, New Jersey. 



Crane posing on a fake rock for a studio photograph in Athens, 1897.



With sincere thanks to two of my favorite "Jerseymen" and the current guardian angels of Arbutus Cottage: Frank D'Alessandro and Tom Chesek.

Those wishing to visit the Stephen Crane House in Asbury Park are invited to visit the following websites for more information:

www.thestephencranehouse.org and www.aphistoricalociety.org

Also recommended are the source materials for this article:

Paul Sorrentino, *Stephen Crane: A Life of Fire*; The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England, 2014

Daniel Wolff, *4th of July, Asbury Park: A History of the Promised Land*; 2005 Bloomsbury USA, New York 2005

Thomas A. Guleson, ed., *A Garland of Writings: Stephen Crane's Literary Family*; Syracuse University Press, 2002