Stephen Crane at Claverack College: A New Reading

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Before his one-year stint as a college student—first at Lafayette College (September to December 1890), then at Syracuse University (January to June 1891)—Stephen Crane attended two coeducational preparatory schools with strong Methodist ties: Pennington Seminary (September 1885 to December 1887), and Claverack College and Hudson River Institute (January 1888 to June 1890). Both schools were to play key roles in young Crane's literary, cultural, and intellectual life. The new evidence offered in this essay corrects long-held positions regarding why Stephen left Pennington for Claverack and the "diminished" reputation of Claverack as a preparatory school.

For almost a hundred years now, it has been assumed that Stephen Crane left Pennington Seminary without graduating and transferred to Claverack College solely for its military training program. According to his sister-in-law, Mrs. George Crane, his "fondness for everything military induced the mother [Mrs. Mary Helen Peck Crane] to send him to the Claverack Military Acad-
emy”. Yet the rumor (it persisted for many years) that Stephen had run away from Pennington and later returned suggested that mysterious and more complex reasons might have been involved in his transfer to Claverack.

I recently discovered an article, “Reminiscences of Stephen Crane”, written by Stephen’s older brother Wilbur F. Crane in his hometown newspaper, the Binghamton [New York] Chronicle, in which he explained why his youngest brother left Pennington for Claverack. Stephen, accused of hazing, had actually left the school in protest of the charge leveled against him. This dark episode was an almost fatalistic prelude to a similar one at Lafayette College, where Stephen himself became a hazing victim. Of the episode at Pennington, Wilbur wrote:

While at Pennington seminary some hazing was done which one of the professors charged to Stephen. He denied any knowledge of it, and when the professor told him he lied, Stephen went to his room, packed his trunk and went home to Asbury Park where he told his story, adding that “as the Professor called me a liar, there was no room in Pennington for us both, so I came home.” Nothing would induce him to return to the seminary.

Stephen’s mother acted almost at once to defuse a potentially traumatic situation. She sent Stephen to Claverack to mollify his outrage and soothe his wounded psyche by appealing to his “fondness for everything military”. This must have been a heart-breaking ordeal for her as well as for her son, who was forsaking the school that his father, the Reverend Jonathan Townley Crane, had not only saved from near closure but rebuilt into a competitive and

2. New York World, 10 June 1900, sec. E., p. 3.
4. See Binghamton [New York] Chronicle, 15 December 1900, p. 3. Only a few months separated the different “readings” by family members of Stephen’s transfer to Claverack. One can conjecture that Wilbur wrote this reminiscence, in part, to rebut Mrs. George Crane’s position.
5. The hazing episode at Lafayette was described by Col. Ernest G. Smith, Class of 1894, in The Lafayette Alumnus 2 (February 1932): 6.
financially sound institution during his nine-year tenure as its principal (1849–58). Young Crane revered the memory of his father, but he found his “status” at Pennington intolerable. Claverack, however, made an acceptable substitute.

On 23 December 1887, the same day the first term ended at Pennington (where Stephen had officially registered for his third year in September), Mrs. Crane began a correspondence with the Reverend Arthur H. Flack, president of Claverack College. Except for its military training department, Claverack was similar to Pennington—Methodist, with ministerial atmosphere and compulsory chapel attendance, as well as strict rules against tobacco, alcohol, gaming, and profanity.

On 26 December, the Reverend Flack responded to Mrs. Crane’s inquiry concerning financial arrangements for the offspring of Methodist clergy: “In reply we would quote you the following terms for board and tuition which are to ministers of the M. E. Church. If your son is over 15 years of age $160—per year for all mentioned under $225 in our catalogue . . .” He did not forget
to assure her: “Should you place your son under our care we would do our best to give him a thorough college preparation and at the same time make for him a pleasant Christian school home”.

Mrs. Crane suggested, in her 30 December letter, extreme caution in assigning a roommate for her son—presumably, she wanted someone who would be a good influence by inspiring him to take formal education more seriously, also helping him avoid anything resembling the hazing experience at Pennington. In his letter the next day the Reverend Flack sought to allay her fears: “We note what you say with regard to room-mate and course of study for your son and will carry out your instructions carefully”. On 12 April 1888, following her letter of 9 April, the Reverend summarized Stephen’s progress at Claverack: “His last report is better than the one before it and is high in all classes except grammar”. He noted further: “Punctuality is low—that should not be—I will stir him up on it and it will be well for you to call his attention to that point also”. In a postscript he wrote: “We will excuse him from declaiming but don’t [sic] like to do so”. (In one of his later short stories, “Making an Orator”, Stephen Crane would describe the tortures of declaiming.)

As late as 20 September 1888, Mrs. Crane, still the anxious parent, was trying to arrange for Stephen’s every comfort, even to his favorite pastime at home, horseback riding. In a letter posted the following day, the Reverend Flack replied that he could not meet that particular request: “One of our regulations is that students shall not hire horses. The livery is connected with the hotel and we do not wish that the students shall have any business there at all. On that account I would not favor the horse-back riding. Stephen is very much interested in base ball and tennis and seems to take all the exercise he has time for out of study hours in that way.”

The Reverend Flack became especially aware of young Crane's presence, not simply due to his extensive correspondence with Mrs. Crane, but because of Stephen's quick progress and success in the military department. The Reverend was not only the president of the school, he was professor of military science as well and headed the military department as colonel. Stephen's comrade-in-arms Harvey Wickham, in his colorful yet partly unreliable reminiscence of Claverack College, captured his classmate's zeal and pride of accomplishment in military drill: "When I arrived at Claverack he [Stephen] was already a first lieutenant, with enough of the true officer in him to have a perfectly hen-like attitude toward the rank and file. Well do I remember the anguish I caused him by dropping my gun during a prize-drill!"7

Stephen rose in rank very rapidly, first to captain, then to adjutant—which was really far more remarkable than his promotion to captain—a post directly beneath Colonel Flack and Major Joseph P. Hines.8 The four companies of the school's military department were under their command. This should have been incentive enough for Stephen to return to Claverack in the fall and attempt to realize a dream: to enter West Point. In all probability, he read the essay "West Point" in the January 1890 issue of the school magazine, The Vidette, where the procedures to enter the military academy were outlined.9 But by September 1890 Stephen had reluctantly transferred to Lafayette College, at the urging of his

8. This information is drawn from the Thirty-Sixth Annual Catalogue of Claverack College and Hudson River Institute (Hudson, New York, 1890), p. 14; hereafter cited as Claverack Catalogue. Lyndon U. Pratt stated that Crane's "acting as the Colonel's adjutant seems no less remarkable than his being singled out in June for one of the next year's captaincies". See his "A Possible Source of The Red Badge of Courage", American Literature 11 (March 1939): 2.
9. The procedures appeared in The Vidette 1 (January 1890): 3. "In order to enter West Point the candidate must have a thorough knowledge of reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography and United States history; he must be of good character, between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two years; he must also be over five feet in height, and stand a rigid physical examination. After having passed the required examination satisfactorily, and having promised to serve
lawyer-brother William, to do something that was more stable and more financially rewarding, like mining engineering.

Though his time at Claverack was only two and a half years, Crane’s experience there was rich in other, non-military respects as well. Besides sports—he was a star on the baseball team—it offered an array of intellectual and artistic opportunities. As Professor William McAfee, who taught Greek and Latin at the school, said: “Following the ministerial and military professions we have the twin arts of painting and music which contribute so much pleasure to our lives and the brightening of our homes”. Indeed, the concerts and lectures on music and painting, along with the “Art Notes” and “Musical Notes” columns in the monthly issues of The Vidette, were as appealing to Stephen as military drill and baseball.

It is known from his letters as well as from Harvey Wickham’s reminiscence that Stephen had become attracted to three coeds—Jennie Pierce, Harriet Mattison, and Phebe (also Phoebe) English—all of whom were enrolled in the departments of art and music. Two of them were mentioned several times in the pages of The Vidette for their achievements: Harriet for her music and Phebe for her painting. No references were found relating to Jennie’s efforts, though she was listed once in “The Roll of Honor”.10

Stephen was at home among girls with cultured interests. The three coeds may have reminded him of his own accomplished and versatile sisters. One sister, Mary Helen (named after her mother, who was herself known for her pen-and-ink drawings, her wax figures, and her good singing voice), was an artist and the winner of several painting competitions; she ran her own art studio in Asbury Park during the 1890s. It is not generally known that she was also a

in the army for eight years, he is immediately admitted to the Academy and his pay of five hundred and forty dollars a year commences. The cadet graduates from West Point as Second Lieutenant, with a salary of fifteen hundred dollars.”


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highly skilled pianist. Another sister, Agnes— who acted as Stephen’s surrogate mother while Mrs. Crane was attending local and national meetings and making speeches on behalf of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union— was also artistically and musically talented. She could sing well and even composed a playful pseudo-oratorio, “Jonah”.¹¹

Stephen himself was musically inclined; he had a pleasant tenor voice. He also had a painter’s eye. It was really not surprising to find in an inventory of items from his New York City apartment, besides two pen-and-ink Civil War pictures, two plaques— of Beethoven and Mozart.¹² Music, in addition to painting, became integral to his writing. In his early Sullivan County Sketches (1892), for example, he made facile use of musical terms like “nocturne” (“The Octopush”), and referred to Wagner (“The Cry of a Huckleberry Pudding”); he employed musical motifs and played with the art of verbal counterpoint. His first fiction, “The King’s Favor”, published by the Syracuse University’s University Herald, had as its hero Albert G. Thies, the well-known tenor, who had per-


¹². A copy of this inventory is in my possession.
formed with the soprano Louise Gerard at Claverack. Stephen was to mention them both in his later news reports, not simply in the style of a practicing journalist, but as a developing connoisseur of music. 13

In all likelihood, Stephen attended the concerts given at Claverack by Harriet Mattison. She was singled out for praise in the first issue of The Vidette (December 1889): “Miss . . . Mattison shows an uncommon musical ability and is a talented performer”. In the annual Thanksgiving musical the “special features . . . were Miss Mattison’s novelette, by Schumann, and the overture [Rossini’s “Tancred”], four hands, by Mrs. Lewis and Miss Mattison”. At the Commencement Concert for June 1890, she “gave three selections from the Classics, and gave them an interpretation equal to that of many artists of renown. Her touch is a model of perfection in its crisp clearness and quality of tone, full of emotional beauty and effectiveness.” Harriet Mattison was attractive to Stephen for another reason too. As an associate editor of The Vidette, she was a budding newspaperwoman. 14 (During the summer months, beginning as early as 1887, Stephen had himself been a shore correspondent at Asbury Park.)

Phebe English, enrolled in both music and art, had her greatest success as an artist. She gave several of her canvases to Stephen, who displayed them in his New York City apartment in the 1890s. Two of the subjects of her work were described in the “Art Notes” columns of The Vidette. (Both anticipate the theme and art of The Red Badge of Courage.) One dealt with the theme of war: “Miss Phebe English has a patriotic canvas entitled ‘War and Peace.’ A

13. It was not accidental when Crane subtitled “The Octopush” as “A Sullivan County Nocturne”. At Claverack, in a musical program, he could learn of “the Nocturne by Chopin. In night pieces Chopin easily excelled” (The Vidette 1 [January 1890]: 10). Both Albert Thies and Louise Gerard were part of the Lecture Course at Claverack, for 1 March 1890 (Claverack Catalogue, p. 29).


14. Mattison’s achievements were noted in The Vidette 1 (December 1889): 3–4; 1 (June 1890): 3; and 2 (November 1890): 22.
gun is in a restful pose by the Star Spangled Banner, which floats around it, and not far distant a military cap and glove painted with realistic effect.” The other painting was impressionistic: “Two panels entitled ‘Sunshine and Shadow,’ one a dreamy, moonlit sky gleaming over the hills, the other a bright noon-day scene. (In combination a perfect whole.)”. Like Harriet, Phebe was also a hard-working newspaperwoman, and as of January 1890 was listed on the masthead of The Vidette as a “special correspondent”.15

There were many other things available at Claverack that were conducive to young Crane’s education, for the cultural-intellectual climate was stimulating and varied. Lectures were delivered by members of the faculty on such topics as history, etiquette, business and social principles, and laws of health. Other lectures were delivered by guest speakers (for example: C. E. Bolton, “The Lands of the Midnight Sun”; the Rev. Elias Osborn, “A Yankee’s Impressions of England”; Chancellor Charles N. Sims [of Syracuse University], “Neglected Life Lessons”; Mrs. Emily Burgess, “Peace and Arbitration”; and the Hon. Will Cumback, “Christianity as a Civilizing Force”). Concerts were given by celebrated performers such as Albert Thies, Louise Gerard, May L. Smith (flutist), and E. Goodrich Smith (violinist). Campus activities included Bible classes held every Sabbath afternoon. Social religious meetings, held twice weekly, included the Society of Christian Endeavor and the Temperance and Anti-Tobacco Society, among others.

Probably the cultural activities most appealing to Stephen were the four literary societies for men and three for women (both with faculty advisors), along with The Vidette, which was organized by four students and published monthly during the school year (presumably with no faculty supervision). On the editorial page of The Vidette the staff announced: “[F]rom the large number of essays and orations which are delivered here, we shall select as far as possible the best for our columns”.16

15. The references to the two pieces of English’s art work were recorded in The Vidette 1 (January 1890): 11; and 1 (June 1890): 10. A valuable background on English’s relationship with Crane is in Joseph J. Kwiat, “Stephen Crane and Painting”, American Quarterly 4 (Winter 1952): 331–38.
During Stephen's tenure at Claverack, *Vidette* editors selected student essays on poets ("Robert Browning" by Harvey Wickham), on military leaders ("Washington Versus Grant"), on military institutions ("West Point"), on an inventor ("Edison and His Inventions"), and on a recent hero ("Henry M. Stanley" by Stephen Crane). They also published one alumnus who wrote on drama ("Illustrations of Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy in Macbeth"), and another alumnus (by then a Syracuse University student) who wrote on up-and-coming colleges and universities ("Syracuse University"). In addition, there was an occasional faculty contribution, such as an extensive piece on a historic native landscape ("The Catskill Mountains"). Two essays were anonymous ("The Philosophy of Taste in Art" and "Italy Lies Over the Alps"). Some of these very topics, genres, and locales would be useful to Stephen's later writings. 17

One special feature in *The Vidette*, inspired by Professor McAfee, was a four-sided written debate; each side had six members. While there is no proof, Stephen may have contributed to one of the debates—"Fiction vs. Poetry, Biography, and History"—because of his early attraction to fiction. 18 The other three debates were signed by individual students: "Biography vs. Fiction, Poetry and History" (J. Hall Jones); "History vs. Poetry, Fiction and Biography" (Frank L. Walsh); and "Poetry vs. History, Biography and Fiction" (George T. Fabricius).

Other regular features in *The Vidette* included traditional poems,

17. A locale, the Catskill Mountains, and topics like German Sirens and "The Invisible Some People", in *The Vidette* 1 (April 1890): 1–3; and 1 (February 1890): 5, 10, reflected the legendary, the mythic, the gothic, and the supernatural. Stephen drew on these when writing his series of comic grotesques, *The Sullivan County Sketches* (1892).

18. Crane may have participated in writing the following passage. If so, it reflects his growing interest in fiction: "Comparing history with fiction cannot one readily see that it displays deeper thought and employs higher talent to put before the people works that have to be entirely original, and have all the characters coincide and blend into one harmonious whole, than simply to record that which is known to have occurred, or in other words a history of the past. . . . And there is no one that will deny that 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' produced far greater results, and that its influence was four fold more towards the extermination of
some by students, others by well-known poets (selections by William Cullen Bryant; a poem by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, reprinted from *The Century*, in the November 1890 issue). Although Stephen Crane did not publish any poems in *The Vidette*, one should not minimize the impact of this poetically active environment on his imagination.

The subject with which young Crane would always be identified—war, with its heroes and heroism—filled the pages of *The Vidette*. At least four available covers of the magazine (this may have been true of the other covers as well) had a sketch of a soldier in dress uniform. The title of the magazine itself reflected the image of war: “As the military spirit here is very prominent, we decided on choosing that name [Vidette], its meaning being a mounted sentinel”. An imposing figure, who was already an institution at the school before Stephen’s arrival, was General John B. Van Petten, professor of history and elocution. For the Thanksgiving Day celebration in 1889, according to *The Vidette*, he was toasted by Captain Herbert A. Puzey of the military department before giving a speech. Young Crane, reading of the event or possibly in actual attendance, would have been duly impressed by Captain Puzey’s remarks about the general, “a member of The Grand Army of the Republic; an organization whose name implies patriotism, bravery, and indomitable energy. . . . One, who in the service of his country, has stood before the cannon’s mouth . . .” The closing words of the recorded tribute to the general might have reminded Stephen of his own summary view of the hero in the essay “Henry M. Stanley”: “A brave soldier, a true Christian . . .”

slavery, than volumes of history describing the horrors of slavery and the fact that it existed and ought to be blotted out.” (*The Vidette* 1 [April 1890]: 5–6.)


Crane’s similar praise of Stanley is in *The Vidette* 1 (February 1890): 9. He published two other pieces in *The Vidette*: “Base Ball” (1 [May 1890]: 11) and “Battalion Notes” (1 [June 1890]: 12).
Amongst the *Vidette* essays of Crane’s period one finds more or less constant reference to talk of war. In the essay “Washington Versus Grant”, for example, the battles of the American Revolution (Trenton, Princeton, Monmouth, Yorktown) and the Civil War (Appomattox) were spoken of, along with heroic figures (Anthony Wayne, Nathaniel Greene, George Meade, and Philip Sheridan). In “West Point” references were made to Bunker Hill, the Mexican War, Washington, Kosciuszko, Custer, Benedict Arnold, and Major André. The poem “Washington” paid homage to the president as a great soldier and statesman. “A Visit to Washington’s Headquarters, Newburgh, N.Y.” described historic relics, Lafayette’s muskets, and Aaron Burr’s sword. The editorial (February 1890) reinforced the image of Washington as “our nation’s greatest general, warrior and statesman . . .” Another editorial (January 1890) supported the value of military drill at Claverack: “One of the greatest advantages of drill in student life is that it affords an exercise which is most essential in the physical development of the body”. A regular feature in *The Vidette* was the column “Battalion Notes”. A poem on the tragic cost of the Civil War, “Over Their Graves”, was reprinted from *The Century*.20

Not all of young Crane’s time at Claverack was uplifting to him. Nevertheless, some of his more unpleasant experiences fortified his critical arsenal. For example, he regarded with hostility Frances E. Willard, “the president of the W.C.T.U. [Woman’s Christian Temperance Union] of America. One to whose praise will be added the plaudits of generations to come”.21 Miss Willard’s philosophy and image were represented in the pages of *The Vidette*; and Stephen later was to quarrel, not with her position on the evils of saloons and intemperance, but with her “fanaticism”, which he satirized in his early novels *Maggie* (1893) and *George’s Mother* (1896).

The “Baccalaureate Sermon” (June 1890), by the Reverend Charles Payne, which Stephen heard or read (or both), did not have the desired effect on his sensibility. His nihilistic volume of

20. See *The Vidette* 1 (December 1889): 11; 1 (January 1890): 1–3; and 1 (February 1890): 1–4.
poetry, *The Black Riders* (1895), was a reverse response to the Reverend Payne’s call for faith:

I have spoken of losing faith in yourselves and humanity, in high ideals and standards. Beware of losing faith in God. There is a God, otherwise this universe is a contradiction, a riddle more perplexing than the Sphinx, and if human nature can’t solve it, it must be smitten into annihilation. There is no reason in anything else. I warn you against losing faith in God. Who will deny the fact that the literature of the day is permeated with unbelief. The most popular phase of it is philosophical agnosticism.22

Claverack did not forget Stephen when he left for Lafayette College in September 1890. His subsequent literary successes were closely monitored. Besides the reference to the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage, a Tale of the Cruel [sic] War* in *The Vidette*,23 there was also an extended review (unknown to Crane scholarship) of the 1896 *Maggie*.24 A half-column was devoted to “Another Book by Mr. Crane”.

*Maggie* was introduced with this paragraph: “The New York *Times* says of the work: ‘Mr. Crane cannot have seen all that he describes, and yet the reader feels that he must have seen it all.’ This is certainly high praise for the book, and suggests the wonderful and vivid powers of the author, of which the following [four quotations from the novel] are illustrations. . . .”

Young Crane did not forget Claverack. He had such fond memories of the school that he made a special two-day visit in January 1891, prior to returning to Lafayette, where he was enrolled for the spring term. In *The Vidette* “Personals” column (January 1891) there was this item: “Stephen Crane of ’90, spent Tuesday and Wednesday, Jan. 6th and 7th, with his friends and classmates at

Claverack. ... [D]uring the summer and fall he has been doing newspaper work. ... Mr. Crane is missed very much on our ball team, but his friends ... will join in wishing with *The Vidette*—‘Success to you Stephen’!"25

It seems apparent that, in addition to the spirit of camaraderie, Claverack College did provide Stephen Crane with a lively social, literary, cultural, and intellectual environment—an environment that can scarcely be deemed to tally with Harvey Wickham’s negative remark: "[T]he high reputation once enjoyed by the school was wholly in the past, and no longer survived save among the uninformed".26 Wickham’s view of Claverack during Stephen Crane’s time, suggesting as it does poor standards and an uninspiring curriculum, has unfairly persist to this day.

Instead of returning to Lafayette for the spring term of 1891, Stephen Crane went instead to Syracuse University. There young Crane revisited and extended his almost idyllic experiences at Claverack College: played on the baseball team, socialized as a member of the Delta Upsilon fraternity, and wrote an early draft of his avant-garde novel, *Maggie*. This, however, was to be Stephen Crane’s last hurrah to school and college life.

26. Wickham, “Crane at College”, 291. A member of the academic department and a student of the conservatory of music where he showed “promise of making one of the leading musicians of the country” (*The Vidette*, 1 [December 1889]: 3), Harvey Wickham was unduly critical of Claverack as an institution. In fact, as we have seen, the school’s offerings were balanced and substantial: with classical and academic departments, a commercial department, departments of music and art, and a military department. The department of natural and physical science included astronomy, botany, chemistry, geology, meteorology, physical geography, physiology and hygiene, and physics. Greek and Latin were taught in the classical course, French and German as the modern languages. In addition, there was a department of oratory and elocution. The equivalent of freshman English was “taught by the oldest and most experienced of the teachers".