

2002

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Thomas Mariadason
Trinity College

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Recommended Citation

Mariadason, Thomas, "A History of Human Rights in Hartford" (2002). *Hartford Studies Collection: Papers by Students and Faculty*. Paper 6.
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A HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN HARTFORD

Thomas Mariadason
Independent Study
POLS 399
Prof. Sonia Cardenas
Trinity College

Thomas Mariadason
Independent Research Project
Prof. Sonia Cardenas
(Lawyers w/o Borders)

A HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN HARTFORD

Background

Pervasive throughout the global discourse on social issues is the terminology of “human rights.” It is a concept that covers a broad swathe of human issue, but, nonetheless, speaks to a fundamental agreement concerning the value and dignity of human beings and their rights in modern society. Historically, the human rights discourse is revealed as an ongoing struggle partaken by different factions of societies against prevailing and often detrimental relationships of power. It is a complicated and malleable idea, vested in the achievement of both opportunity and equality.

Hartford, a community that has spanned nearly the entirety of American history, contains such an amalgam of different flows of human rights discourse in its history. Since its post-colonial days, it has witnessed the agency of insurgent leaders and communities, as well as a more mainstream restructuring of the governing bodies with the end goal of defending and empowering individuals to greater levels of equity. The confluence of different historical paths that has occurred across its borders has made for a rich and unique story of human struggles for justice and equality. By mapping the convergence of these various paths, the evolving scope of human rights discourse might clarify Hartford’s place in both the global and American contexts of human rights.

...It is essential to promote the development of friendly relations...(Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948)

Of the numerous modern texts that claim seminal value to human rights discourse, none is so bold in proclaiming itself a “common standard” than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. It is a document that served to materialize what a great deal of Western thought prior to the 20th century (as well as untold volumes of ancient Eastern philosophy) had so often struggled to resolve against the backdrop of intra- and international conflicts. In the preamble to its declaration, the writers of the document prompted the “development of friendly relations between nations”ⁱ as an essential precursor to the arrival of these ideas concerning the basic conditions of the “human family.” In fact, the idea of the fundamental value of ‘peace’ in the globalized human society finds a considerable and original articulation in the peace societies of Hartford and New England in the early Nineteenth Century, more than one hundred years prior to the Declaration.

Hartford’s American Peace Society, which emerged in 1828 at the hands of William Ladd, was actually a consolidation of several local peace societies that had been established just a few years earlier by individuals like Noah Worcester and David Low Dodge. These peace societies were the first of their kind in the world.ⁱⁱ Embedded in the post-colonial era of American expansionism and wrought from the War of 1812, these societies were focused squarely against the ideas of war and belligerency as part of the modern American and worldwide society. Indeed, the peace society activists of this time period were concerned not only with setting a precedent for the future of the new

American society, but also with establishing an agreement on the nature of dialogue between all nations and all human individuals. As the Hartford Convention of 1815 boldly asserted regarding the federal government, “rarely can the state of this country call for or justify an offensive war.”ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, it limited the use of force by the government to “acts of hostility...in defence of the territories of the United States when actually invaded.”^{iv}

The New England pacifists were calling for a radical new approach to state building that had implications for the entire international community. Elihu Burritt, who would later become the leading figure of the mid-nineteenth century peace movement, went so far as to conceive of an international body that could regulate conflicts globally and, in his own radicalism, defied any use of ‘justified’ violence.^v His activism, as well as that of the peace society members from Hartford to Boston, contributed to the convention of the First Universal Peace Conference in 1843, which took place in London, UK. Although limited in representation, the conference nonetheless made strong resolutions against the policies and manner of forceful conflict in non-Western locations such as China and Afghanistan.^{vi} Human rights discourse had certainly transcended the borders of the state far before human beings had done so through the current globalization of technology. Peace activists were calling for an unconditional abolition of war and a universal embracing of diplomacy in all inter-state relationships. Rooted in Christianity, this sense of urgency attributed a strong fundamental value to all human life.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person. (Article 3)

Still, Hartford's service as a hub for the peace society movement could only illustrate the paradox of such forward thinking as it surfaced from the American context. At this very time in the country's history, the entire slave population of the United States still endured the yolk of repression and limited dignity under the law. Although the slave trade had ended in the early 1800s, blacks still had no independence from their masters, no right to vote or property, and faced severe discrimination in every facet of American society. The gravity of human rights violations against blacks in America would reach its greatest magnitude in this period, and yet, amidst its depravity, there emerged a fighting advocacy for the restoration and preservation of the basic human rights to "life, liberty and security." In Connecticut, African Americans comprised only about 2 percent of the total population during the nineteenth century.^{vii} Nonetheless, their unique history of resistance in Connecticut certainly warrants attention.

Most notably, Hartford itself played stage to one of the most compelling dramas of resistance by individuals threatened by the chains of slavery. In 1839, 53 native Africans of the Mende culture revolted on board the *Amistad*, a Portuguese slave trading vessel bound for the Americas.^{viii} After landing in Cuba, the cadre of defiant African captives killed the cook and captain and took control of the entire ship, directing the remaining crew to sail back east to Africa.^{ix} As nighttime fell, however, the slave traders succeeded in redirecting the ship northeast from the Caribbean, and soon the ship was seized by a US naval vessel and brought to port in Connecticut.^x

The circumstances of the *Amistad* presented a difficult but unique situation. Slavery was still legal in Connecticut, and the *Amistad* captives, led by Sengbe Peih (named Cinque by the Portuguese) were indicted on murder charges. Abolitionists sought

to bring attention to the trial because of its paradigmatic possibilities—if successful, the inherent value of Africans as free human beings and non-property entities could echo repercussions into the legal conditions of American slaves. Defended by Roger Baldwin, a noted champion of the “unfortunate” and an individual already associated with abolitionist causes, the 53 Africans underwent criminal proceedings in Hartford, at the Old State House. Although unwilling to directly address the issue of human freedom, the Circuit Court Judge (and also US Supreme Court Justice) Judge Smith Thompson ruled that the case was outside the bounds of US jurisdiction, since the mutiny occurred in Spanish waters.^{xi} The quandary of whether the African captives were free human beings or property would be left unresolved and, thus, the case was referred to the District Court, again in Hartford.

The second set of proceedings provided the breakthrough and, although not often remembered, the decision of Judge Judson certainly fortified the emerging conceptualization of the slave trade as “kidnapping.” Judson declared that the Mende captives were “born free” and attempted to provide for their prompt return to Africa. His emancipating decision was stymied shortly by an appeal, and the case was sent to the US Supreme Court. Again, Roger Baldwin would champion the cause of the Mende, but this time with the assistance of former president John Quincy Adams. Despite arguing the case before a majority of slave-owning Supreme Court Justices^{xii}, the duo ultimately convinced the court to rule that the transported Africans were indeed free and entitled to passage home to Africa.

For the Abolition movement, the Amistad case became a landmark and source for legal exposition against the slave codes. It was a staggering step backward from the cliff

of human intolerance and persecution, and left a trail of language that could be later cited as defense for the inherent dignities of all humankind. Hartford had again served as backdrop for progress but, as the evolution of human rights discourse mandates, such progress only warranted further change.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex... (Article 2)

The Amistad decision, like the Peace Societies of the nineteenth century, clearly demonstrated the presence of forward thinking in the New England region. The broader repressions of human life had been deemed unacceptable. War and violence was pronounced intolerable under all circumstances. Slavery was judged a violation of the basic dignity of humankind. Universal egalitarianism was the essence of the dialogue surrounding these progressive movements. Yet practice hardly seems to follow precept too closely behind, especially in a world so thoroughly entrenched in institutions and behaviors that support human rights violations, and thus after the abolition of slavery in 1848, Connecticut, along with the other states in the Union would undergo dramatic changes as the socio-political sphere expanded and was restructured. The Women's Movement would grow exponentially over the course of the next few decades, while freed blacks and immigrants from Europe made urban centers far more diversified and raised numerous issues of conformity.

Before the achievement and ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, women throughout the United States manifested cooperative struggles for greater freedom of

movement and decision-making through their individual lives. Their contributions to the evolution of human rights could be measured with every bold foray that a female citizen made against the normative establishment and into the realm of traditionally male-dominated fields of study. In Hartford, few groups of women proved as illustrious and well-accomplished as the daughters of the Beecher family. The litany of women, five of whom are inductees of the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame included writers, educators, suffragists, and political activists. Catherine Esther Beecher, the oldest of the Beecher daughters, founded Hartford Female Seminary in 1823. Although "not a suffragist or abolitionist," she boldly advocated women's education through her curriculum and her endorsement of the American Women's Educational Association.^{xiii} She wrote various texts covering an array of issues, and collaborated with her more renowned younger sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, on one writing project. Harriet, whose impact on the Civil War era was not underestimated by President Lincoln, continued to write after the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Using her reputation, she published more books in the abolitionist mold of *Uncle Tom's*, and provided a direct linkage between women's struggles and the struggles of people of color through her published works.^{xiv}

The Beecher women's contributions to human rights activism were hardly relegated to the academic sphere though. Isabella Beecher Hooker founded the Connecticut Women's Suffrage Association, served as its president for nearly two decades, and "for seven years until its passage, ...submitted to the Connecticut legislature a bill to guarantee women the same property rights as their husbands."^{xv} Her trailblazing entrepreneurship for women's sociopolitical independence appears to have been inherited by not-so-distant relative Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the author of *Women and*

Economics—widely considered a foundational feminist text.^{xvi} Gilman, despite her bouts with depression and her time in a sanitarium, left an indelible impact on Women’s education through her work, which was later translated into several different languages.^{xvii}

Altogether, the Beecher women of Connecticut provided an important link to the future of human emancipation, and, symptomatic to their individual successes, did not limit their influence to their own racial and sexual constituency. It would be a fitting capstone to their lives that, by the time of Charlotte’s passing, blacks and women had won the right to participate in the democratic process.

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him. (Article 10)

During the suffragist movements, political rights seemed an important stepping stone to securing more critical opportunities of social advancement. While the flows of the Women’s Suffrage Movement and the Black Abolitionist/Suffrage Movement had certainly intermingled and provided each other with greater fortitude, the task of breaking down the social barriers to the underprivileged classes of people remained (and still remains) an arduous and on-going process. By the early 1940s, Hartford’s demographics had already been transformed by an influx of immigration from the European continent in the early twentieth century and was set for a new wave of immigration that would occur after the 1950s from the Puerto Rican and broader Latin American community. With a

new urban mixture of blacks, Latinos, and semi-established ethnic communities of Irish, Italian, and Polish heritage, Hartford would seem ripe with the problems of culture clash.

The response of Hartford's legislature to the need for a regulating institutional structure would be entirely unprecedented. In 1943, "State Senator William H. Mortensen of Hartford introduced a bill in the General Assembly that would create an 'inter-racial commission,' an agency that would give the blessings of 'democracy,' as he put it, to all the citizens of the state."^{xviii} Under the governorship of Raymond Baldwin, Mortensen's bill was passed and in June of 1943 the Connecticut Inter-Racial Commission was born—the first of its kind "in the world."^{xix} Prior to that, no other state had established a commission of inquiry on race relations—a human rights commission—"to investigate the possibilities of affording equal opportunity of profitable employment to all persons...compile facts concerning discrimination in employment, violations of civil liberties and other related matters."^{xx}

The Commission's role would change over the course of its existence, but its focus would always remain upon what many considered the key to the attainment of true equality: equal employment. In order to begin its work, the Commission conducted preliminary surveys over the next two years of the overall employment picture for minorities in the entire state, and the results indicated that the new agency had its work cut out for it.^{xxi} Not only were the indications of discrimination in hiring practices substantial, but the Commission contextualized them within the greater scope of educational and housing opportunities, where indeed the state still needed improvement.

While the initial emphasis for the Commission appeared to be an inter-racial or civil rights or even a "human rights" education bureau for the entire Connecticut region,

the docket of complaints that fell into its hands made certain that this relatively passive role would need to be expanded beyond the contours of sweeping social education. In 1947, the Commission would be transformed into a more powerful human rights administrative body via the passing of the Fair Employment Practices Act in the General Assembly (FEPA). Under the new law, it was authorized to “receive and initiate complaints...[and] to investigate the problems of discrimination in all fields of ‘human relationships.’”^{xxii} The new powers had a significant effect and provided swift results: “violations of the Public Accommodations Statute were decreasing, ...the educational efforts of the Commission were being well received, ...and even the restrictions against Negroes in the Connecticut National Guard was considered a short lived barrier [after the Commission’s fifth year].”^{xxiii}

The Commission was gradually becoming a forum for the redress of issues of discrimination in a wide range of circumstances. Over the course of the next decade, the Commission would fight to gain more teeth for its functions. It would gain a greater power to initiate complaints for Public Accommodations, an affirmative power for the Hearing Tribunal, and in the meantime, expand its educational programs across the cities and towns of the state. By the 1950s, the Commission fielded hundreds of complaints each year and had undergone a name change to the Commission on Civil Rights. Replete with research and education divisions, publications, surveys, and reports, the Commission became a hub for human rights education and empowerment during a dramatic period of social change for the entire country. Its evolution was reflecting, to an increasing extent, the awareness of rights violations and the broader range and deeper socialization that undergirded such violations against human dignity.

By the 1960s, the Commission could articulate its role far more comprehensively than before. The objectives had expanded beyond simply targeted obstacles to empowerment and equality to “the total situation of the minority group person: his employment and unemployment, his housing, his education and health, his civil liberties, his psychological burden in the face of community rejection, past and present.”^{xxiv} As such, the statistical data that the Commission garnered continued to point to an “overall picture [that] seemed bleak.”^{xxv} Housing and employment research illustrated a discrepancy in the quality and value of goods received by constituents of color to those received by white counterparts. Still, the national movement elicited a strong desire to reform legislation for opportunities and to expand the powers of the bureau. By 1967, Governor John Dempsey called the “Governor’s Conference on Human Rights and Opportunities” as a response to this growing desire, with the specific intention of “mobiliz[ing] the public and private sectors to translate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ‘Dream’ into reality.”^{xxvi} It was a public milestone to demarcate the “increasing awareness” of the public and its officials, and to legitimate through more inclusive terminology the struggles of various constituencies in securing their personal and social privileges. Subsequent to the events of that year, the Commission underwent a final name change and became the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities.

Everyone has a right to a nationality. (Article 15)

The early work of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities occurred during a period when the issues of national identities certainly seemed at the forefront of

the most contentious news. Hartford's various constituencies were all vying—collectively and separately—for greater inclusion and greater access to opportunities. Yet the distinct dynamics of the city hardly warranted a homogeneous approach, and producing instead a strong affiliation between rights and culture. As Hartford headed into its most recent demographic evolution, it was clear that Latin Americans and Puerto Ricans particularly, would embody a new path to liberation and equality that many marginalized immigrant communities would continue to take.

The life of Maria C. Sanchez perhaps describes this complex dynamic between group identity and egalitarianism in human rights discourse best. Prolific in her contributions to the Puerto Rican community of Hartford, Maria Sanchez served as a mentor and role model for individuals in her community by specifically tending to their needs. She was responsible for the initiation of six activist community organizations that served to invigorate and care for the poorer Latino constituencies. From the Puerto Rican Parade Committee to the Spanish American Merchants Association to the Society of Legal Services and the Community Renewal Team, Sanchez's approach enveloped several facets of successful socio-economic community dynamics.^{xxvii}

Through her example, success, and dedicated responsibility Sanchez dramatically secured the rights and respect of Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and women in Hartford and Connecticut. Such self-sacrifice and giving was rewarded a year before her death, when in 1988 she became an official “first of her kind” and gained election as the first Hispanic, female legislator in the history of the Connecticut General Assembly. In particular, her success as a human rights activist demonstrated the ultimate importance of individual members of disenfranchised communities in both fostering a greater sense of

social empowerment for their own constituencies and breaching the traditional lines of exclusivity in the institutions of power.

Synopsis

In 2001, the city of Hartford continued its tradition of firsts in human rights and opportunities when Eddie Perez was elected Mayor of Hartford. Perhaps indicative of the accomplishments of all the previously mentioned individuals and organizations, Perez's victory poses the possibility for active advancement by previously underprivileged citizens on behalf of the entire underprivileged community. Although the history of human rights in Hartford appears at first entrenched in a battle of color lines that describes the relative levels of "privilege" as being black or white or Latino, it is far more apparent in both the modern city of Hartford and from its history that, as the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities annual reports state, the array of "classes that are protected" has grown since the city's inception to include all those diverse people of "race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."^{xxviii} It is through the passage of Hartford's struggles and through newly evolved levels of communication and awareness with the globalized world that the city now attempts to realize greater inclusion and greater advocacy for all identifiable segments of the population. Its non-profit activist organizations have increased in range and foci, representing more individual segments of the community while serving as active agents for greater enfranchisement.

Hartford's human rights legacy has and will always remain vested in the vision and history of the United States. While its visionaries have imagined a more peaceful and equitable global society through their fundamental examination of human dignities, the United States and the city of Hartford have yet been able to resolve the critical domestic inequalities—perhaps rooted in disdain and a careless rebuttal of the underlying causes of exploitation and discrimination. As the city evolves in the more globalized twenty-first century, it is essential that a cosmopolitan sense of inclusion and contribution be fostered and enacted by its citizens, one that is true to the progression flow of the human rights discourse as it has flowed through the city over time. Such a vision, much like the vision of Hartford's peace activists, will be achieved only through the constant struggles of people seeking greater human dignity.

ⁱ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations.

<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

ⁱⁱ Janis, Mark. "Protestants, Progress and Peace: Enthusiasm for an International Court in Early Nineteenth America." *Religion and International Law*, 1999, 191-209.

ⁱⁱⁱ Janis, Mark.

^{iv} Janis, Mark.

^v Janis, Mark.

^{vi} Janis, Mark.

^{vii} White, David O. "Blacks in Connecticut." *The Museum of Connecticut History*.

<http://www.cthum.org/encyclopedia/topicalsurveys/blacks.htm>

^{viii} Grant, Steve. "The First Civil Rights Victory." *The Hartford Courant Projects: Amistad, Give Us Free*.

<http://courant.ctnow.com/projects/amistad/hist1.stm>

^{ix} Grant, Steve.

^x Grant, Steve.

^{xi} Grant, Steve.

^{xii} Linder, Doug. "Lewis Tappan and the Africans of the Amistad." *Lewis Tappan and the Amistad Case*.

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/trialheroes/Tappanessay.html>

^{xiii} "The Beechers of Hartford." *Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame*.

<http://www.cwhf.org/browse/beecher.htm>

^{xiv} "The Beechers of Hartford."

^{xv} "The Beechers of Hartford."

^{xvi} "The Beechers of Hartford."

^{xvii} "The Beechers of Hartford."

^{xviii} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th Anniversary. *The Connecticut Historical Society Manuscripts*.

^{xix} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th

^{xx} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th

^{xxi} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th

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- ^{xxii} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th
- ^{xxiii} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th
- ^{xxiv} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th
- ^{xxv} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th
- ^{xxvi} The History of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, at the 25th
- ^{xxvii} “Maria C. Sanchez.” *The Connecticut Women’s Hall of Fame*.
<http://www.cwhf.org/browse/sanchez.htm>
- ^{xxviii} Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations.
<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>