

Boston African American

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U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site
Massachusetts





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Black Boston: *The North Slope of Beacon Hill*

Text by James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton

The largest African American community in Boston during the decades before the Civil War was on the northern slope of Beacon Hill, in the shadow of the Massachusetts State House. Although some black Bostonians lived in the North End and in the West End north of Cambridge Street, over half the city's 2,000 blacks lived on Beacon Hill just below the homes of wealthy whites. The historic buildings along today's Black Heritage Trail® were the homes, businesses, schools, and churches of a thriving black community that organized, from the nation's earliest years, to sustain those who faced local discrimination and national slavery, struggling toward the equality and freedom promised in America's documents of national liberty.

Crispus Attucks, black martyr of the Boston Massacre, was the symbol of sacrifice in the name of liberty for black Revolutionary War soldiers who helped bring a free nation into being. Yet American promises of freedom and equality rang hollow in the ears of slaves like Quok Walker, who sued for his liberty in 1783. With his victory, Massachusetts abolished slavery, declaring it incompatible with the state constitution. Free blacks, uniting families and seeking mutual support, concentrated in Boston's North End near the docks and sea where many worked.

Black Bostonians' organizations, like the African Society and Prince Hall Masons, spoke out against racial discrimination and slavery.

Establishment of the African Baptist Church and construction of its African Meeting House on Beacon Hill in 1806 drew many blacks to hear the church's dynamic minister, Thomas Paul. Soon the center of an active community, the meeting house hosted a school, community groups, musical performances, and antislavery agitation. From these slopes Prince Hall denounced the ill treatment of blacks in Boston, David Walker exhorted southern slaves to rise up against their



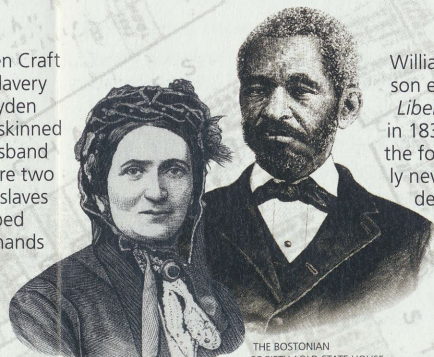
masters, Maria Stewart called black men to greater exertions on behalf of their race, William C. Nell spearheaded the successful movement for school integration, Lewis Hayden defied southern slave catchers, and Frederick Douglass inspired black men to enlist in the Civil War to end slavery.

In 1831 white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison launched his radical newspaper *The Liberator* promoting interracial antislavery alliances and the protection of fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad. Boston earned its reputation as a strong center of abolition during

antislavery protests in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Black and white Bostonians took direct action to protect and sometimes rescue fugitives seeking shelter in the city.

In the Civil War black Bostonians formed the core of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, fighting to preserve the United States and destroy slavery. Boston's blacks, mainly domestic workers, laborers, and sailors, created an active community on Beacon Hill that fought for better working conditions. They joined other blacks and white abolitionists, building a campaign that brought freedom to all blacks.

Fugitive slave Ellen Craft and Boston antislavery activist Lewis Hayden (right). The light-skinned Craft and her husband William Craft were two of many fugitive slaves that Hayden helped keep out of the hands of slave catchers.



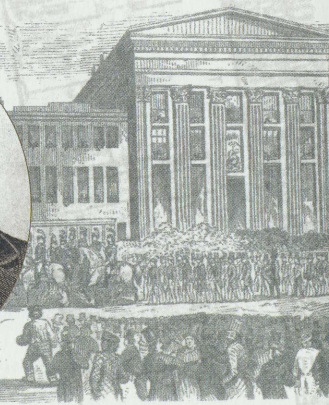
African Meeting House (left).

William Lloyd Garrison established *The Liberator* in Boston in 1831. He devoted the four-page weekly newspaper to the defeat of slavery.



The slavery trial of Anthony Burns (right) in Boston galvanized Northern opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

After the trial, U.S. marshals and a company of marines escort Burns to a ship to take him back to Virginia and slavery (far right).

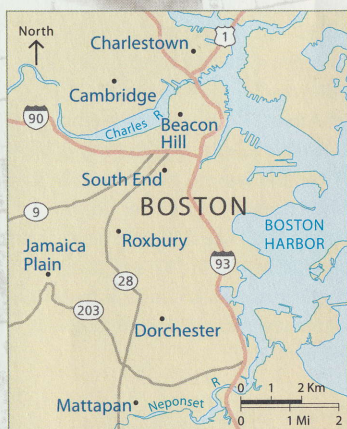




Reformer Wendell Phillips addresses an anti-slavery meeting on Boston Common, April 11, 1851 (*far left*).

Col. Robert Gould Shaw, son of a Boston abolitionist family, commanded the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first all-black military unit raised in the North in the Civil War (*middle*).

Poster in Boston recruiting African Americans for service in the 54th Regiment, 1863 (*near left*).



Boston's African American community has traditionally lived in neighborhoods shown here.

After the Civil War many freed African Americans moved north. Boston's black population increased from fewer than 2,500 in 1860 to nearly 12,000 by 1900. Most newcomers came from the Southeast, some brought by the Freedman's Bureau for training and employment as domestic servants. They expanded black residential areas, settling in Boston's South End and Roxbury. Gradually long-time black residents of Beacon Hill moved their businesses and homes to that area. By 1930 South End and Roxbury were home to most of Boston's 21,000 African Americans.



John J. Smith, Boston abolitionist (*above left*).



Sgt. William H. Carney, the nation's first black Medal of Honor recipient (*left*).

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Black Boston Highlights: 1638–1909

1638 First enslaved Africans brought to Boston aboard the slave ship *Desire*.

1641 Massachusetts enacts *Body of Liberties* defining legal slavery in the colony.

1770 Crispus Attucks, an escaped slave, is first colonist killed in the Boston Massacre.

1783 Slavery abolished in Massachusetts.

1798 First black private school opens in home of Primus Hall.

1800 Free black population nears 1,100.

1806 African Meeting House opens as First African Baptist Church.

1808 Hall house school moves to African Meeting House.

1826 Massachusetts General Coloured Association, a black abolitionist group, founded in the African Meeting House.

1829 David Walker publishes *The Appeal*, an essay urging slaves to fight for their freedom.

1831 William Lloyd Garrison begins publishing *The Liberator*.

1832 Garrison forms New England Anti-Slavery Society at the African Meeting House.

1835 Abiel Smith School opens, Boston's first black public school; replaces African Meeting House school.

1849–50 Sarah Roberts unsuccessfully challenges segregation in Boston public schools.

1850 Fugitive Slave Law requires fugitive slaves be returned to their owners.



Abiel Smith School

1855 Boston integrates public schools; Abiel Smith School closes.

1861 Civil War begins.

1863 Emancipation Proclamation signed; 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment formed, the first all-black regiment raised in the North.

1865 Civil War ends; 13th Amendment abolishes slavery.

1897 Robert Gould Shaw Memorial honoring 54th Massachusetts Regiment dedicated on Boston Common.

1898 Black congregation at African Meeting House moves to Roxbury; meeting house becomes a Jewish synagogue.

1900 Sgt. William H. Carney, veteran of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, receives Medal of Honor for rescuing the flag during the Battle of Fort Wagner, S.C., in 1863.

1901 William Monroe Trotter begins publication of influential African American magazine *The Boston Guardian*.

1909 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded, with overwhelming support of black and white Bostonians.



54th Regiment Memorial

The American Revolution was a turning point in the status of African Americans in Massachusetts. In 1783 the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts declared slavery unconstitutional. When the first federal census was counted in 1790, Massachusetts was the only state in the Union to record no slaves.

The free African American community in Boston was concerned with finding decent housing, establishing independent supportive institutions, educating their children, and ending slavery in the rest of the nation. Between 1800 and 1900, most African Americans in Boston lived in the West End, between Pinckney and Cambridge streets and between Joy and Charles streets, a neighborhood now called the North Slope of Beacon Hill. Many of these homes are part of the Black Heritage Trail.®

Note: Historic homes on the Black Heritage Trail® are private residences and not open to the public. Please respect the privacy of homeowners.



George Middleton House

54th Regiment Memorial Park and Beacon streets

Responding to pressure from black and white abolitionists, President Lincoln admitted African American soldiers into the Union forces in 1863. The 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was the first black regiment recruited in the North. On July 18, 1863, the 54th regiment led an assault on Fort Wagner in an attempt to capture Confederate-held Charleston, S.C. In this hard-fought battle, Col. Robert Gould Shaw and many of his soldiers were killed. Sgt. William Carney of New Bedford was wounded while saving the flag from capture. Carney was awarded the Medal of Honor for his bravery, the first black soldier to receive this honor. This bronze memorial by Augustus Saint-Gaudens was dedicated May 31, 1897, in a ceremony that included Carney and members of the 54th Regiment.

George Middleton House 5-7 Pinckney Street

Built in 1787 this structure is one of the oldest standing homes on Beacon Hill. George Middleton



Phillips School

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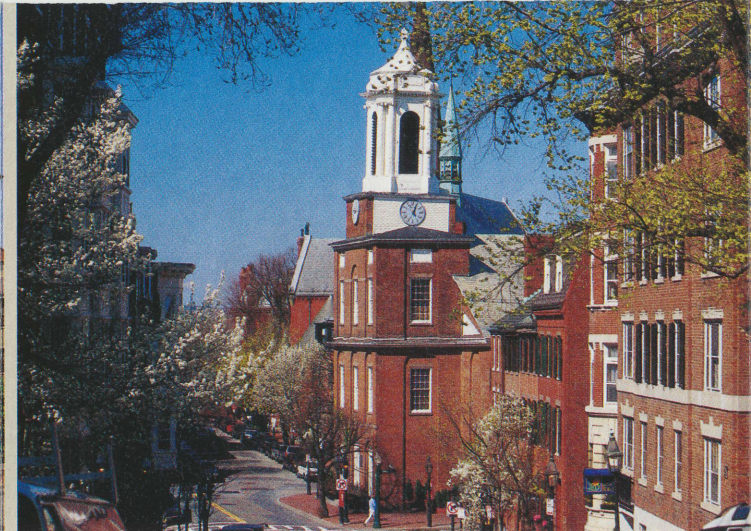
(1735-1815), one of the original owners, was a Revolutionary War veteran. Middleton led the Bucks of America, one of three black militias that fought against the British. After the war he became an activist and community leader, helping found the Free African Society and serving as the 3rd Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons, a fraternal order started by black Bostonian Prince Hall.

Phillips School Anderson and Pinckney streets

This architecture is typical of 1800s Boston schoolhouses. Built in 1824, this was a white-only school until 1855. Black children attended school on the first floor of the African Meeting House or, after 1834, the Abiel Smith School. When the Massachusetts Legislature abolished segregated schools in 1855, the Phillips School became one of Boston's first integrated schools.

John J. Smith House 86 Pinckney Street

Born free in Richmond, Va., John J. Smith (1820-1906) moved to Boston in the late 1840s. He opened



Charles Street Meeting House

a barbershop that became a center for abolitionist activity and a rendezvous point for people escaping on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, Smith was a recruiting officer for the all-black 5th Cavalry. He was later elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives for three terms. Smith lived here from 1878 to 1893.

Charles Street Meeting House Mt. Vernon and Charles streets

This meeting house was built in 1807 by the white Third Baptist Church of Boston. New England's segregationist tradition of church seating prevailed. Timothy Gilbert, church member and abolitionist, tested the tradition in the mid-1830s by inviting black friends to his pew one Sunday. Gilbert was expelled. Joined by other white abolitionist Baptists, Gilbert founded the First Baptist Free Church, which became Tremont Temple—considered to be one of the first integrated churches in America. After the Civil War, Boston's black population increased, and the largest of its churches bought the building in 1876. The African Meth-

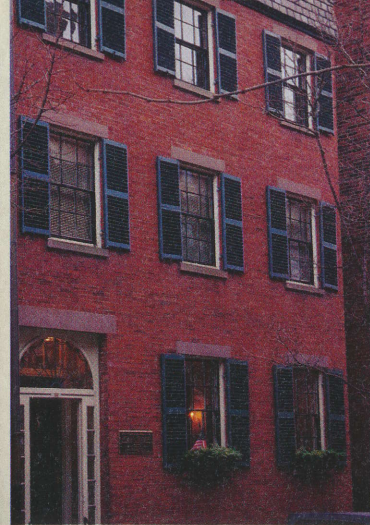
odist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) remained here until 1939, the last black institution to leave Beacon Hill.

Lewis and Harriet Hayden House 66 Phillips Street

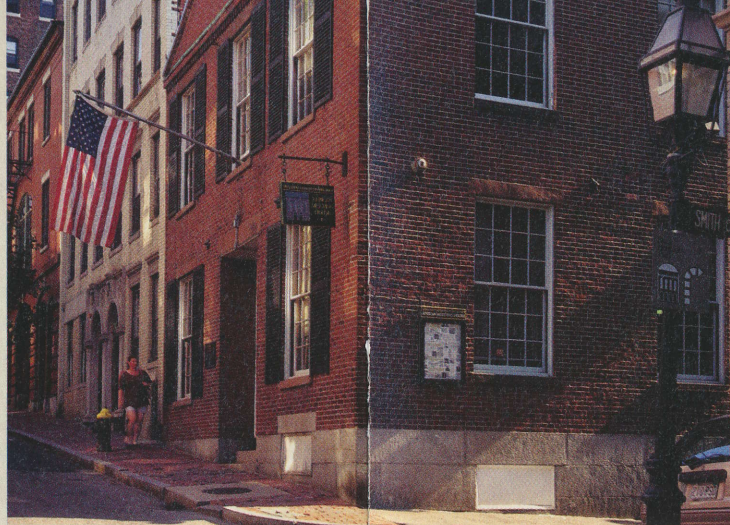
Lewis Hayden (1816-1889), born enslaved in Lexington, Ky., escaped with his wife Harriet and settled in Boston. Lewis became a leader in the abolition movement, and the Hayden House became an integral stop on the Underground Railroad. The Haydens reportedly kept kegs of gunpowder in their home that they threatened to ignite if slave catchers tried to enter. Hayden also recruited for the 54th Regiment, was a Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons, and was later elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

John Coburn House 2 Phillips Street

John Coburn (1811-1873) was a clothing retailer and community activist. He served as treasurer of the New England Freedom Association, an organization dedicated to helping people escape from



Lewis and Harriet Hayden House



Abiel Smith School at Smith Court

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slavery. In 1851 he was arrested, tried, and acquitted for the courthouse rescue of Shadrach Minkins, a freedom seeker who was caught in Boston by federal slave catchers empowered by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Coburn was co-founder and captain of the Massasoit Guards, a black military company in 1850s Boston that was a precursor to the 54th Regiment.

Smith Court Residences

3, 5, 7, 7A, and 10 Smith Court

These five homes typify those of black Bostonians in the 1800s. • *Number 3* Owner James Scott's Underground Railroad activity is documented in the records of the Boston Vigilance Committee. Like John Coburn (see 2 Phillips Street), Scott was arrested, tried, and acquitted for the 1851 rescue of Shadrach Minkins. William Cooper Nell, abolitionist and community leader, also lived at Number 3. Nell, the driving force in the struggle to integrate Boston's schools in 1855, is considered the nation's first published black historian. • *Number 5* Owner George Washington was a bootblack, laborer,

and African Meeting House deacon.

• *Numbers 7 and 7A* Joseph Scarlett, chimney sweep and entrepreneur, owned this building in the 1860s; it served as rental property. • *Number 10* Scarlett also owned this property next to the African Meeting House. At his death in 1898, Scarlett owned 15 properties in Boston, a testament to his hard work and success in business.

The brick apartment houses on the west end of the court and on the corner of Joy Street typify the tenements that developers built between 1885 and 1915. The apartments provided inexpensive, dense housing units for the waves of late-1880s European immigrants. Except for the Smith Court Residences, most wooden houses were torn down to make way for these four- and five-story apartments.

Abiel Smith School

46 Joy Street

White philanthropist Abiel Smith willed money to the city of Boston for educating African American children. The city built this school building with Smith's legacy. In

1835 Boston's black children attended the Smith School, which replaced the school in the African Meeting House. The school remained Boston's black public school until public schools were integrated in 1855.

African Meeting House

8 Smith Court

The African Meeting House, built by free black laborers in 1806, is considered the oldest surviving black church building in the United States. In the 1800s the building served as the center of religious, social, educational, and political activity for Boston's free black community. William Lloyd Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society here in 1832. Frederick Douglass spoke here, and it was a recruitment station for the 54th Massachusetts Regiment during the Civil War. At the end of the 1800s a Jewish congregation bought the building, and it served as a synagogue until 1972, when it was acquired by the Museum of African American History.

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Planning Your Visit

Boston African American National Historic Site works in partnership with the Museum of African American History, the City of Boston, and private property owners to promote, preserve, and interpret the history of Boston's free African American community on Beacon Hill in the 1800s. It includes homes, businesses, schools, and churches of a community that struggled against the forces of slavery and injustice.

Black Heritage Trail® This 1.6-mile walking tour begins at the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial and ends at the Abiel Smith School (see map). Ranger-led tours are available year-

round. For information about tours, call 617-742-5415 or visit www.nps.gov/boaf.

Accessibility Ask the park for details. Service animals are welcome.

More Information

Boston African American National Historic Site
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www.nps.gov/boaf

To learn about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities visit www.nps.gov.

Museum of African American History The museum preserves, conserves, and interprets the contributions of African Americans in New England from colonial times through the 1800s. It also honors those who found common cause with African Americans in the struggle for liberty and justice. The museum operates the Abiel Smith School and African Meeting House.

Museum of African American History
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