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# Black Boston: *The North Slope of Beacon Hill*

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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.

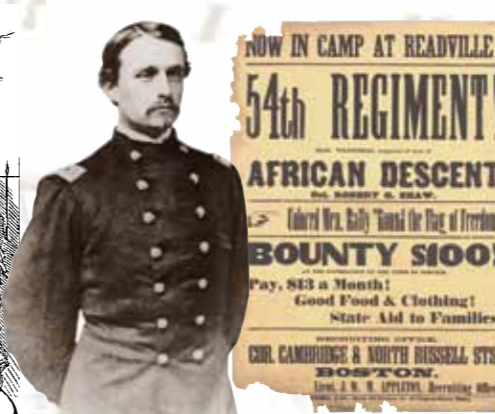
Establishment of the African Baptist Church and construction of its African Meeting House on Beacon Hill in 1806 drew many blacks to hear the church's dynamic minister, Thomas Paul. Soon the center of an active community, the meeting house hosted a school, community groups, musical performances, and 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 domestic 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 dur-

ing 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.



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).

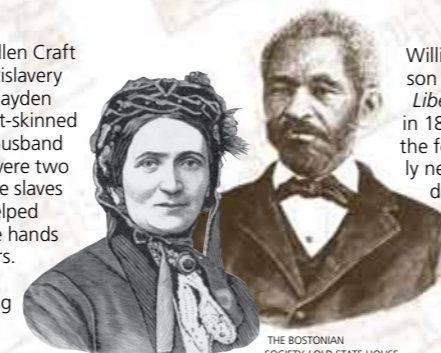
Poster in Boston recruiting African Americans for service in the 54th Regiment, 1863 (near left).



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.

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.



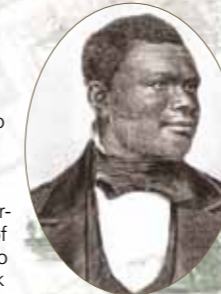
African Meeting House (left).

THE BOSTONIAN SOCIETY / OLD STATE HOUSE

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).



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.

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