

Boston African American National Historic Site

Museum of Afro American History, Dudley Station, Box 5
Boston

The Boston African American National Historic Site, located on the northern slope of Beacon Hill, encompasses the Black Heritage Trail, which introduces visitors to the history and architecture of a free black community active during the 1800s in the abolition movement.

The trail originates at the African Meetinghouse, the oldest extant black church building in New England. It was here in 1832 that William Lloyd Garrison's New England Anti-Slavery Society issued its Declaration of Anti-Slavery Sentiments. In the ensuing years such prominent abolitionists as Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, and Charles Sumner spoke from the pulpit to denounce slavery. Throughout the 19th century, the meetinghouse hosted musical performances, literary society meetings, socials, political rallies, school classes, and worship services.

Across the street from the meetinghouse are the Smith Court residences, typical homes of black families built between 1799 and 1853. The house at 10 Smith Court, next to the meetinghouse, was built by a black chimney sweeper named Scarlett. William C. Nell (1816-74), a black community leader in school integration and a Revolutionary War historian, once lived at 3 Smith Court.

The Abiel Smith School, built in 1834, is adjacent to the African Meetinghouse. It was the first school to provide primary and grammar school education to Boston's black children. After the Civil War, the school became a center for black veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The next site along the Black Heritage Trail is a small, sturdy, clapboard house built by Colonel George Middleton. Middleton was known for his leadership of the "Bucks of America," an all-black militia in the American Revolution. It is the oldest African American-built house on Beacon Hill.

Many 19th-century African Americans obtained employment along Joy Street to the Boston Common. The edge of the Boston Common features the Robert Gould Shaw-54th Regiment memorial honoring Civil War black soldiers.

The Black Heritage Trail doubles along Joy Street and travels down Pinckney Street to the Phillips School, built in 1824. When state legislation integrated schools in 1855, the formerly white school became the first racially integrated school in the city.

Just one block above Charles Street is the residence of John J. Smith from 1878 to 1893. A barber and a caterer, he served three terms in the state legislature and was later appointed to the Boston Common Council. As an active crusader for the black community, he was involved in the movement to integrate Boston schools and to develop an all-black cavalry during the Civil War.

On Charles Street is located the Charles Street Meeting House, built in 1807 by the Charles Street Baptist Church whose congregation restricted black members to the galleries. In the mid-1830s Timothy Gilbert challenged this rule, and his subsequent expulsion from the church led to the founding of Tremont Temple, Boston's first integrated church. The Charles Street Church was purchased in 1876 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It remained a center of black religious activities until 1939, when the congregation moved to Roxbury.

Located on Phillips Street is the home of Lewis Hayden (1815-89). Hayden, an escaped Kentucky slave, and his wife, Harriet, settled in Boston in 1849 and became active in the

abolition movement. Their home is the most documented of Boston's Underground Railroad stations, having sheltered many fugitive slaves. A clothing dealer, Hayden helped recruit the all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment and later served a term in the state legislature.

On the corner of Phillips and Irving streets is the Coburn Gaming House. It was built in 1843-46 for John P. Coburn, a clothing dealer, and his family. Coburn and his brother-in-law also operated a gaming house here.

The Boston African American National Historic Site was authorized by Congress October 10, 1980. Its components, coordinated by the National Park Service, remain in federal ownership. [CA 10/10/80 NPS, 80004396]