PROVIDENCE WALKS: EARLY BLACK HISTORY

FROM THE BEGINNING: 1636–1865

Providence history is Black history, from the early days of the colony to today. Roger Williams founded Providence in 1636 on land inhabited by the Narragansett, Wampanoag and other tribes. In 1737, British colonizers turned to the business of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery to support themselves. They imported captive Africans who helped to build this colony and others throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Providence elites developed a system of laws and codes to uphold the business and the structure, and to ensure profit for the owning class. By the mid-1700s, Rhode Island slave traders were a dominant force in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the majority of the town's and colony's economy was connected in some way to the trade, including the production of goods such as rum, candles and iron. There was a clear economic interdependence with plantations in the Caribbean, Southern colonies and even Suriname, where ships docked to trade captives for goods like sugar and cotton. In 1764, Governor Stephen Hopkins wrote, "Without this [slave] trade, it would have been and will always be utterly impossible for the inhabitants of this colony to subsist themselves, or to pay for any considerable quantity of British goods." The upper-class colonists would also have had to cook and clean for themselves.

The majority of the early Providence population participated in and/or benefited from the slave trade. But over time, questions were raised. Enslaved people resisted in many ways, and began to speak out publicly. Some were manumitted (released from slavery) by their owner, others by circumstance. Free Black people and abolitionists called for change. The Revolutionary War prompted a wave of Black freedom, followed by the Gradual Emancipation Act in 1784, and freed people started to build free communities, advocating for, and even purchasing, the freedom of beloved family and friends.

As this was unfolding, many white people still clung to the system that built this wealth and created a powerful ruling class. Abolition was not an event; it was a process. Slowly, the role of slavery within the state's borders decreased, but this did not end Rhode Island's economic and social entanglement with the system. For example, Rhode Island was one of the largest producers of "Negro cloth" from cotton imported from the South, supplying the plantation market with cheap, low-quality fabric worn by enslaved people.

The legacy of slavery and its aftermath is deep, uncomfortable, and, in many ways, has been hidden and silenced. Despite this, generations of Black Rhode Islanders lived and thrived. Taking this tour is an act of remembrance, which honors the lives of those whose stories are only partially known, but who contributed significantly to the city you see today.

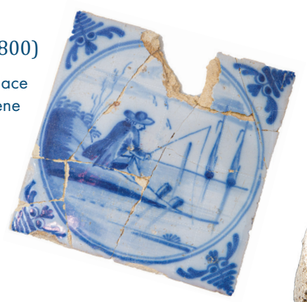
PIECING TOGETHER HISTORY

These artifacts are just a few of the many thousands of objects that were found at the North Shore archaeological site; the location of Providence's Snowtown neighborhood of the 1820s to 1840s. Although the residents would have been very poor, they lived and worked using things that are mostly familiar to us today. Long-hidden objects, such as ceramic tablewares, glass bottles, toys, coins and a multitude of tools — needleworking tools, painter's tools, metalworking tools — all offer us a glimpse into the past of those whose lives were rarely, or incompletely, documented.



Thimbles (1840s–1880s)

Brass sewing "motto thimble" — common in the 19th century and often given as gifts to young girls — marked Token of Friendship



Tile (1600–1800)

English tin-enameled fireplace tile with fishing scene



Padlock (1840s–1890s)

Heart-shaped iron padlock with swinging brass key cover



Crucible and Stand (1840s–1880s)

Small fire clay Hessian-type metalworking crucible and rack or stand

"In the north part of the city was a place called Addison Hollow, but was nicknamed Hardscrabble. A great many coloured people purchased land there, because it was some distance from town, and hence quite cheap. They put up small houses for themselves, and earned their living in various ways." — *William J. Brown*



Painter's Pot (1820s–1840s)

Redware, lead-glazed painter's pot with paint layers in black, green, blue, red and yellow



Medicine Bottle (1852–1867)

Dr. Langley's Root & Herb Bitters medicine bottle, marketed to cure liver and sour stomach complaints with the motto "Buy me and I'll do you good"



Dominos (1820s–1840s)

Bone and ebony domino



Ruler (1820s–1840s)

Bone folding ruler with brass hinge



Plate (1795–1830)

Pearlware dinner plate with printed "Blue Willow" pattern

Bodkin (1820s–1840s)

Iron bodkin, a needlework tool typically larger than a needle that was used for threading ribbons, laces and cords



Horseshoe (1820s–1840s)

Wrought iron horseshoe



Coin (1822)

American 1-cent coin, Liberty Head "Coronet Matron" type

Objects are housed at The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc. in Rhode Island.

PROVIDENCE WALKS
Early Black History



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"American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it."
— James Baldwin, American Novelist & Activist (1924–1987)

PROVIDENCE PERSONALITIES

"Passports are not issued to persons of African extraction. Such persons are not deemed citizens of the United States." — *Providence Customs Official*

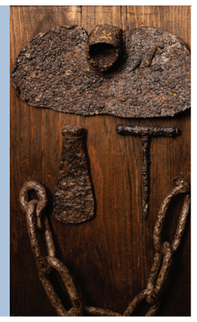


Thomas Howland

Thomas Howland was the first Black man elected to public office in Providence in 1857. He worked as a grocer and stevedore but was denied a United States passport immediately after the Dred Scott decision. He left Providence for Liberia due to this discrimination.

Cudge Brown

Cudge Brown was enslaved by Moses Brown and then manumitted by Brown in 1768. He married freedwoman Phillis, and they later raised a family on Olney Street. He grew a garden that was passed down for generations and worked as a teamster, carting materials all over Providence and beyond.

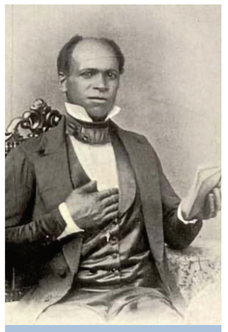


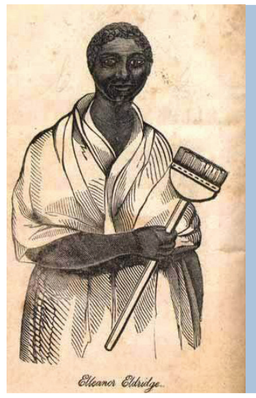
William J. Brown

William J. Brown was born free in 1814, grandson of Cudge and part of the extended Brown family of enslaved and freed people. He was a keen observer who knew the Black community well. He worked as a shoemaker and minister, and in 1883 wrote a book, "The Life of William J. Brown," about his experiences.

St. Jago Hopkins

St. Jago Hopkins grew up enslaved in the Stephen Hopkins household. He was manumitted in 1772 and worked as a rigger. He married Rose King in 1778 and later a woman named Abigail, with whom he bought a house in 1789. He had five surviving children: Samuel, Amos, Rosannah, Elizabeth and Sally.





Elleanor Eldridge

Elleanor Eldridge was a free Black and Narragansett woman born in 1794 with an entrepreneurial spirit. She owned a home on Spring Street, which was taken from her, but she sued to get it back. To help fund her legal fight to regain the lost property, she worked with author Frances McDougall in 1843 to pen "Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge," recounting her life. She died in 1862.



Emmanuel "Manna" Bernoon

Emmanuel "Manna" Bernoon and his mother, Amey, were enslaved by the Gabriel Bernon family. After manumission in 1736, Manna founded and ran the first Oyster and Ale House in Providence on Towne Street (now South Main Street) near the working waterfront. He lived with his wife Mary, a washerwoman, in their own home on Stampers Street. At the time of his death, he had an eclectic inventory of clothing and objects. He died in 1769 and was buried in North Burial Ground.

George Henry

George Henry was born into slavery in 1819 in Virginia but escaped to Providence. A strategic thinker and skilled mariner, he was an entrepreneur, a community leader and sexton at St. Stephen's Church; worked for school integration; and wrote a memoir, "Life of George Henry."

Shoemaker Family

When Jacob Shoemaker died without a will and no heirs in 1774, the six people he had enslaved became the property of Providence. Listed as "Shoemaker's Negroes" in the census, the reality is that despite the law, Thomas, Phebe and their four children were not property but *people*. They were freed by Providence on the condition that their labor was not needed to pay their enslaver's debts. (It wasn't.) Thomas helped to build Market House.



Fibba Brown

Fibba Brown was an enslaved servant of Stephen Hopkins. She lived and worked in his house for many years. Waking early, she prepared meals, kept the fires burning, cleaned the house and cared for the Hopkins family, as well as her own children. She was finally freed and joined the Olney Street household of her husband Bonner Brown. She died in her 90s in 1820.

Pero Paget

Pero Paget was a laborer and stonemason enslaved by Henry Paget. He contributed skilled labor to buildings throughout Providence, including Market House and Brown's University Hall, as well as bridges and roads. He died in 1780 at age 72 and was buried in North Burial Ground.

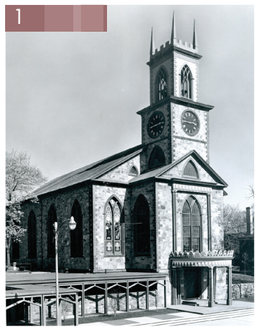
A. POINT OF INTEREST



North Burial Ground
5 Branch Avenue

North Burial Ground, built in 1700, is one of the oldest cemeteries in Providence. A Black Heritage Tour Map is available for free in the office, and you can take a walk through the city of the dead and pay your respects. Be sure to visit Patience Borden, who in 1811 donated all of her money "to the relief of poor people of color."

1



Cathedral of St. John & Burial Ground
271 North Main Street

This cathedral, originally built as King's Church in 1722, was funded in part by the Triangle Trade. Enslavers and enslaved people both worshipped here. It is now the site of The Center for Reconciliation, an organization dedicated to educating the public about slavery and its aftermath. You can visit the grave of an enslaved family in the adjacent burial ground; Phillis Chace, her daughter Rose, and Rose's daughter Fanny are all memorialized with one stone.

B. POINT OF INTEREST



Mount Hope Sharing Garden
Billy Taylor Park, 124 Camp Street

Mount Hope Sharing Garden is a community garden near the historically Black Olney Street neighborhood where many historic figures lived. Stop by this garden to honor the contributions and knowledge of Rhode Island Black farmers, free and enslaved, as well as the importance of plants, food and medicine to their survival.

2

Roger Williams National Memorial
282 North Main Street

This site helps us to remember the role of Indigenous people in our story. Providence's original inhabitants experienced slavery and oppression during colonization. Black and Indigenous people also formed alliances and families despite the legal and social barriers of a challenging Colonial system. Visit the interpretive center to learn more about this story.

3



Snowtown
82 Smith Street

The current Rhode Island State House was built on the site of Snowtown. Following the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1784, newly emancipated, indentured and freeborn Black Rhode Islanders needed places to live, work, play and build community. In a pattern typical to the U.S., a statewide social, legal and economic system of white supremacy replaced the social, legal and economic system of slavery. Alongside white and Indigenous poor and working-class people, Black residents settled in marginalized Providence neighborhoods such as Hardscrabble, Snowtown, Olney Street and Stamper's. Archival and archeological records present examples of persistence, entrepreneurship and care work in these majority Black communities, which were also targets of racially motivated oppression and violence.

C. POINT OF INTEREST



Snowtown "Riot" Plaque
North End of Roger Williams National Memorial

During the 1824 Hardscrabble Riot, a white mob destroyed 20 Black-owned homes and businesses. Seven years later, during the 1831 Snowtown Riot, another white mob terrorized Black neighborhoods for four days, resulting in the death of five people, the damage and destruction of 18 buildings, and the ultimate intervention of the Rhode Island state militia.

4



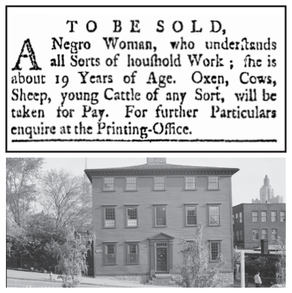
Dr. Jabez Bowen House
39 Bowen Street

Dr. Bowen provided medicines and care to the people of Providence. He also provisioned slave ships with medicine chests and wrote instructions for slave captains to administer the substances. At least three enslaved people lived in this house — Jenny, her daughter Dinah, and Fortune.

5

Providence Gazette
21 Meeting Street

This house, also called "Shakespeare's Head," housed John Carter and his newspaper business, *The Providence Gazette*. It's a place to consider the role of media in upholding slavery. We can look at ads from Rhode Island newspapers selling enslaved people and seeking help capturing "runaways," as well as articles and images. At least two enslaved people lived and worked here, Ingow and Fanny, who were manumitted in 1789.


TO BE SOLD,
A Negro Woman, who understands all Sorts of houſhold Work; ſhe is about 19 Years of Age. Oxen, Cows, Sheep, young Cattle of any Sort, will be taken for Pay. For further Particulars enquire at the Printing-Office.

6



The Old Brick School House
24 Meeting Street

Unequal access to education has been an ongoing issue since the founding of America. Although the struggle crosses racial and ethnic lines, enslaved and free Black people faced additional racist legal and systemic challenges that created terrible inequity. Thanks to years of advocacy, Providence began to build schools for all students, and eventually outlawed segregation in 1865. This circa 1769 building housed a piece of that story. The "Colored" School was a separate school for students of color beginning in 1828. Eventually, attendance declined and Providence schools were integrated.

7



Congdon Street Baptist Church
17 Congdon Street

Originally founded in the First Baptist Meeting House in 1819, this is the oldest continually operating Black church in Providence. The church, which was rebuilt in 1869, provided a space for the growing Providence Black community to meet their spiritual needs and work together to access education, meeting space, and the agency and social capital that comes from institutions.



8

Market Square & Market House
4 Market Square

Market House was built by many hands beginning in 1775. Black laborers were essential in this work, beginning with site preparation, masonry, material-gathering and more throughout the whole process. Pero Paget, Thomas Shoemaker and Pomp Smith all made significant contributions of labor. Once it opened, Black entrepreneurs worked the market stalls inside and out, including free Black butcher George Thomas and George McCarty, a native of Montserrat who ran a refreshment stand.

9



Stephen Hopkins House
15 Hopkins Street

Ten-time Governor of Rhode Island Stephen Hopkins enslaved at least six people in this house: Fibba Brown, St. Jago Hopkins, Adam, Prince, Bonner Jr. and Prime. The house is one of the few places in Rhode Island where we can view both the workspace of enslaved servants and their sleeping quarters. Go upstairs and contrast the bedrooms of the enslaver Hopkins and his family with those of the enslaved right next door.



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STAGES OF Freedom

D. POINT OF INTEREST

1st Rhode Island Regiment
57 Benevolent Street

This address marks the home of Black Veteran Richard Cozzens and his wife Hannah Robinson. During the American Revolution, enslavers could send their enslaved men to fight in their place. Black and Indigenous men also joined by choice, whether to support the cause of freedom or for the promise of personal emancipation. These men formed the 1st Rhode Island Regiment and fought bravely alongside a racially mixed group of soldiers. Many enslaved survivors were granted freedom after the war, although some had to push to get it.

10



Joseph Brown House
50 South Main Street

Joseph Brown both participated in the slave trade and enslaved people via his family businesses. Some of those enslaved persons lived and worked in this house. At the time of his death there were four enslaved people in the household, including Phillis, Jenny and Fortune, who lived in the attic. This house was later used as a bank, a vital contributor to the system of slavery.

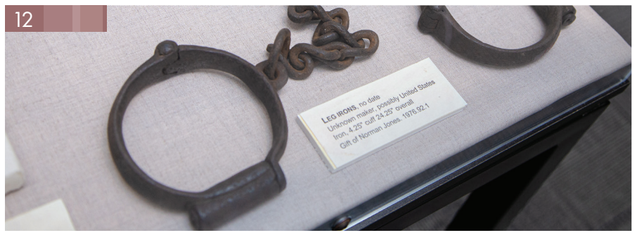
11



Welcome Arnold House
21 Planet Street

This house was the site of an ongoing legal situation. Amyntus "Mint" Martin was enslaved to a woman named Rebecca Martin. He fled her Newport home to Providence and found work as a seaman on Arnold's vessels. The enslaver tried to force his return to Newport, but eventually settled for taking Martin's hard-earned wages.

12



Sally Gallery at John Brown House
52 Power Street

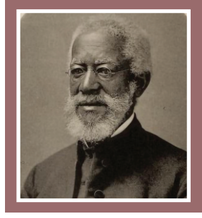
This educational space tells the story of the slave ship Sally and its voyage from Providence to West Africa to Antigua and back in 1764–1765. While all slave voyages were inherently violent, this one suffered a particularly high loss of life. There was an insurrection, grave illness and even suicide. Visit the Sally gallery for free to see how this illness and death was tracked via double-entry bookkeeping — within the framework of slavery, these human tragedies were just a "business expense."

ESEK HOPKINS HOUSE*

Esek Hopkins was captain of the Sally, leading the terrible slave voyage of 1764–1765. He also enslaved several people at his home in North Providence, and brought his young Black indentured servant Edward Abbey aboard the Sally to "teach" him. Hopkins went on to command the U.S. Navy during the Revolutionary War for a time. His home is at 97 Admiral Street in Providence.

**Not depicted on map*

E. POINT OF INTEREST



Christ Church/St. Stephen's
400 Benefit Street

There is a strong lineage of Black churches in Providence. Churches provide space for community building, mutual aid and ritual. Christ Church was an early Black Episcopal church organized by a group of free Black men. They first hired pastor Alexander Crummell, who faced opposition from state church leaders and went on to a long career outside Rhode Island. The church's Pond Street building burned, so the congregation joined St. Stephen's in the 1850s. This is currently the site of the Barker Playhouse.

13



Providence Shelter for Colored Children
11 Wickenden Street

Originally located at this spot on Wickenden Street, the shelter was founded by white Quaker women in 1838 as a house set up to care for and assimilate children of color who were orphaned and/or in need. After a fire in 1847, the shelter was moved to 20 Olive Street. The shelter has transformed into a foundation that supports organizations serving Black children to this day.

"The parents were looking for adequate child care, while the founders had different ideas: they shared many of the period's views about the children of the poor, who, they believed, needed to be taught how to work and how to behave." — ProvidenceShelter.org

14

India Point Park
201 India Street

You are standing on the former working port of Providence. This area, India Point and the larger Fox Point neighborhood, has been a major point of entry and exit for people and goods since the Colonial period. There were wharfs, distilleries, ropewalks, warehouses, snack bars, candle factories and a hospital. Ships were built, repaired, loaded and unloaded right here. This was a major location for labor in Providence, including that of enslaved and free Black people. Take a moment to reflect on the journey.

Tour was written and researched by Elon Cook Lee and Traci Picard, with Julia Renaud, all from The Center for Reconciliation.