

Mapping the North End's Black Community, 1780-1810

Slavery in Massachusetts gradually came to an end in the 1780s. In 1783, the state supreme court found that the institution violated the new Massachusetts constitution, which declared that “all men are born free and equal.” The court had no means of enforcing its decision, but most enslaved people in the Commonwealth were free within the next few years. Slavery had become increasingly unpopular during the revolutionary era—largely through the efforts of enslaved people pointing out its incompatibility with the ideals of the American Revolution—and most enslavers were willing to accept the ruling of the supreme court.

Unfortunately, the abolition of slavery did not lead to equal rights for Boston’s Black population. Discrimination was widespread in the city’s schools and churches, job opportunities were limited, and Black Bostonians endured what abolitionist Prince Hall described as “daily insults” in the streets.

The North End was home to most of Boston’s Black population in the immediate post-emancipation era. This map uses individual stories to explore how Black North Enders adjusted to life in a society where slavery was no longer legal, but equality remained elusive.

You can explore this map by clicking a specific location in the map or by using the arrows on the side of the screen. On a mobile device, tap the map to see markers, and swipe right or left in the text to move between sites. The map is designed to be explored in any order; some pieces of context are given more than once so they are easy to find.

This map was created by Dr. Ryan Bachman as part of a research fellowship from the Paul Revere Memorial Association, the nonprofit that operates the Paul Revere House.

For Reference: Paul Revere House

Present-day address: 19 North Square

Historical street name: North Square

Revere owned the house that we call the Paul Revere House from 1770 to 1800, and lived in it with his family for a good portion of that time. After he sold it, the next owners rented out rooms to recent immigrants and sailors. There are no complete records of everyone who lived in the house during this time period, but the occupants we do know of were white, and most of them were from Ireland and Scotland. This house has been a museum owned and operated by the nonprofit Paul Revere Memorial Association since 1908.

The people featured in this map were Revere's neighbors. We don’t know how many of these neighbors he knew, but their stories are valuable in their own right as well as giving us insights into this neighborhood.

Pero Property

Home of John Pero and Ann Mary Flamaud Pero
Approximate modern address: 5 North Square
Historic street name: North Square

On this site stood the home of John and Ann Mary Flamaud Pero. The Pero family leased the building from the Catholic Church for almost thirty years.¹ During that time, it served as both a place of business and community for the North End's Black Catholic population.

The Peros were both from the French West Indies. Ann Mary, also known as Anne Marie, was born in Martinique on December 17, 1782.² Little is known of her background, but she was likely born free and of African and European descent.³ Ann and her paternal grandmother fled Martinique when she was twelve years old, arriving in the United States in June 1795.⁴ At the time, the French colony was under British military occupation, having been captured by a British fleet the year before.⁵ The Flamauds likely landed in Philadelphia, but moved to Boston by the time of Ann's marriage in late 1797.⁶

John Pero, also known as Jean Pierre Perault, was from the French colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti). Like Ann, he was of both European and African ancestry and likely born free.⁷ It is unknown exactly when John came to the United States, but he was apparently among the thousands of Saint Domingans who fled the violence of the Haitian Revolution in the 1790s.⁸ On September 26, 1797, John married Ann Mary Flamaud in the Church of the Holy Cross, the first Catholic congregation in Boston.⁹ The couple subsequently began boarding in a single-story building on North Street where John also kept a barbershop.¹⁰

John and Mary lived on North Street for around six years. In either late 1803 or early 1804, they moved into a building on North Square that was owned by the Catholic Church.¹¹ The church owned several rental properties in Boston at the time. At least one other site was rented to a couple from the French West Indies.¹² These types of arrangements likely helped recent arrivals get established in their new home country. They also may have been examples of Catholic solidarity in a majority-Protestant city with a long history of anti-Catholicism. The Peros' new home was a three-story building with commercial space on the bottom floor but, strangely, John continued renting shop space on North Street for the rest of his life. He died suddenly in 1807, leaving behind Ann and their three young children.¹³

In the wake of her husband's death, Ann converted their sizeable home into a boarding house. The 1810 U.S. Census recorded thirteen people of color at Ann's address.¹⁴ Accounting for Ann and her children, this means that up to nine boarders lived onsite. At some point in the early nineteenth century, Ann also began leasing the commercial space on the building's first floor.¹⁵ Of the people known to have lived and worked in Ann's building, most were fellow Black Catholics. This included Ann's second husband, Henry J. Revinason, whom she married in 1813, and her third husband, Emiliano Felipe Benicio Mundrucu, whom she wed in 1828.¹⁶

Tragedy struck Ann's family two years after her marriage to Mundrucu. On the night of March 9, 1830, a fire broke out in the shop that Mundrucu kept on the first floor of his wife's building. It quickly spread throughout the three-story structure, killing three people. One was Ann's son, Henry Pero. Another was a boarder named Victor Villeneuve, a fellow West Indian parishioner at Holy Cross. The final fatality was Maria Elizabeth Dodge, a young Haitian-American woman who was visiting Ann when the fire started.¹⁷ Ann's marriage may have been another casualty of the fire, as she separated from Mundrucu shortly thereafter.¹⁸

Miraculously, the building itself survived the blaze. Ann and her surviving children finally purchased it from the Catholic Church in 1831, then flipped the property for a massive profit in 1833.¹⁹ Ann subsequently moved to a property on Ann Street where she likely died around 1840.²⁰

1. They moved in in 1803 and purchased the property in 1831. “Taking Book Ward No. 4, 1803,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821; Benedict Fenwick, grantor, to John B. Pero and Anne Mary Pero, grantees, Jun. 28, 1831, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 353, page 151.¹⁹

2. Naturalization petition of Anne Mary Revinison, Jun. 3, 1831, District Court, Massachusetts, Naturalization Records, Vol. A-B3, V.1 (P.1-205, Cont.), 1790-1847. Accessed through Ancestry.com.²⁰

3. Flamaut’s marriage record described her as a “French mulatoo girl.” William C. Leonard, “Growing Together: Blacks and the Catholic Church in Boston,” *The Historian* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 261.²¹

4. Lloyd Belton, “‘A Deep Interest in Your Cause’: The Inter-American Sphere of Black Abolitionism and Civil Rights,” *Slavery & Abolition* 42, no. 3 (2021): 11; Naturalization petition of Anne Mary Revinison.²²

5. Forrester A. Lee and James S. Pringle, *A Noble and Independent Course: The Life of the Reverend Edward Mitchell* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2018), 9.²³

6. Philadelphia was the most common destination for refugees from the French West Indies at the time. Also, in her naturalization record, Ann specified that she had arrived in the United States on June 1, 1795. The only ship from Martinique to arrive in the U.S. on that date was the *Sally and Betsy*, which landed in Philadelphia. “Arrived,” *Philadelphia Gazette*, Jun. 1, 1795.²⁴

7. Leonard, “Growing Together,” 261.²⁵

8. Belton, “‘A Deep Interest in Your Cause,’” 11.²⁶

9. Leonard, “Growing Together,” 261.²⁷

10. “List of Ward No. 3, May 1798,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1798 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.²⁸

11. The Peros were first recorded at the property in 1803. Its owner was listed as their pastor, Francis A. Matignon. Subsequent tax lists described the Peros as owning the site, but this was apparently an error. It was not until 1831 that John and Ann’s children bought the property from Bishop Benedict Fenwick. “Taking Book Ward No. 4, 1803,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.

Benedict Fenwick, grantor, to John B. Pero and Anne Mary Pero, grantees, Jun. 28, 1831, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 353, page 151.²⁹

12. Leonard, “Growing Together,” 273.³⁰

13. Probate Records of John Pero, 1807, no. 22946, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org.[↵](#)
14. 1810 U.S. Census, Ward No. 2, Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, enumerated Aug. 6, 1810, page 14. Accessed through Ancestry.com.[↵](#)
15. In 1830, for example, it was used as a clothing shop. “Fire,” *Boston Courier*, Mar. 8, 1830.[↵](#)
16. Like John Pero, Revinason was a barber from the French West Indies. He kept his shop in Ward 4 even after moving into the Pero property in North Square. Leonard, “Growing Together,” 275-276.; “Taking Book Ward No. 2, 1815,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1815 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.
- Mundrucu was an anti-slavery revolutionary originally from Brazil. Caitlin Fitz, “Latin America and the Radicalization of U.S. Abolition,” *Journal of American History* 108, no. 4 (Mar. 2022): 711.[↵](#)
17. “Distressing Fire,” *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine (Boston)*, Mar. 13, 1830.[↵](#)
18. Fitz, “Latin America and the Radicalization of U.S. Abolition,” 711-712.[↵](#)
19. Benedict Fenwick, grantor, to John B. Pero and Anne Mary Pero, grantees, Jun. 28, 1831, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 353, page 151; Ann Mary Revinason, et al, grantors, City of Boston, grantee, Jul. 19, 1833, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 370, page 265.[↵](#)
20. This was the last time that she was listed in the Boston city directory[↵](#)

Little Property

Home of Frank Freeman
Modern address: 1H Garden Court Street
Historic street name: Garden Court

The house that stood on this site is best remembered as the residence of Thomas Hutchinson, the Loyalist governor of Massachusetts from 1771-1774. After his property was confiscated during the American Revolution, the mansion was eventually purchased by a wealthy merchant from Connecticut named William Little.¹ Like other upper-class families, the Littles employed a number of household servants, including a Black man named Frank Freeman who lived here in the mid-1790s.² Unfortunately, almost nothing is known about Freeman, who disappeared from the historical record after 1794. Given his last name, which was commonly adopted by enslaved people after acquiring their freedom, he may have once been enslaved, likely doing the same type of domestic work that he did for the Littles.

1. Henry Lee, “The Clark and Hutchinson Houses,” in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. XVIII (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1881): 347.[↵](#)
2. “Taking Book Ward No. 3, 1794,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1794*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

Holden Property

Property of Joel Holden and Margery Moho Holden

Approximate modern address: St. Leonard's Peace Garden, 320 Hanover Street

Historic street name: Prince Street (note: the Holden-Moho property fronted on Prince Street, but the modern-day street address for the garden is on Hanover Street.)

Near this spot stood a small building that belonged to Joel Holden and Margery Moho. The couple owned the property from 1795 – 1802.¹ It is unclear exactly how they used the tiny structure. It may have served as their home, a place of business, or some combination thereof.

Holden's early years are a mystery. He first appeared in the North End in the mid-1780s. Like many Black men in that part of town, he worked a variety of jobs. Some historical records described him as a day laborer, others as a domestic servant.² In 1789, Holden even tried his hand as a businessman and kept a stall in Market Square.³

Holden married Margery Moho in June 1795.⁴ Moho was a member of the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag from Canton, Massachusetts.⁵ She was born to George Moho and Mary Bancroft around 1774.⁶ Marriages between people of Indigenous and African descent were common in eighteenth-century New England. As Native populations declined, tribal members increasingly married outside of their communities. It was especially common to wed people from other marginalized groups.⁷ Indeed, Moho was one of several Ponkapoag women who married Black men around this time.⁸

Holden purchased the lot on Prince Street the same month as his wedding. The property only measured nine by ten feet and included a small building.⁹ The couple may have used this structure as their new home. After all, cramped living conditions not unusual in the eighteenth-century North End. Alternatively, the Holdens could have used the building as some sort of store. Its dimensions were similar to those of Holden's old market stall, and Prince Street was dotted with small shops during this era.¹⁰

Holden and Moho only stayed in the North End for a few years. By 1798, the couple were renting a house in the newer, up-and-coming Black neighborhood in the West End.¹¹ They left Boston altogether the following year and moved to Canton.¹² According to local history, Holden and Moho lived out their days in a wigwam in the southeastern part of town.¹³

1. Joel Holden bought the property in June 1795. Christian Arnold, et al, grantors, to Joel Holden, grantee, June 23, 1795, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 180, page 226.

Joel Holden and Margery Moho Holden sold the property in April 1802. Joel and Margery Holden, grantors, to John Hooton, Jr., grantee, April 29, 1802, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 200, page 295.[↩](#)

2. The abovementioned deed from 1795, for example, described him as a laborer.

In 1790, tax records described him as a servant. "List of Ward No. 10," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↩](#)

3. "List of Ward No. 4," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1789 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)
4. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages From 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 415. [↵](#)
5. Technically, she was born in Stoughton, as Canton did not split away from that community until 1797. [↵](#)
6. Daniel V. T. Huntoon, *History of the Town of Canton, Norfolk County, Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1893), 27. [↵](#)
7. David R. Mandell, *Tribe, Race, History: Native Americans in Southern New England, 1780-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 224-230. [↵](#)
8. Huntoon, *History of the Town of Canton*, 32-35. [↵](#)
9. Christian Arnold, et al, grantors, to Joel Holden, grantee, June 23, 1795, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 180, page 226. [↵](#)
10. For example, a ten-by-twelve-foot shop was located just next door. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States' Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 8. [↵](#)
11. *Ibid.*, 272. [↵](#)
12. "Strayed or Stolen," *Massachusetts Mercury (Boston)*, Nov. 8, 1799. [↵](#)
13. Huntoon, *History of the Town of Canton*, 27. [↵](#)

Roby Rental Property

Home of Jephtha Fitch and Chloe Perkins Fitch
Approximate modern address: 34 Prince Street
Historic street name: Prince Street

A tenement building owned by a white landlord named Henry Roby once stood on this lot. An African American couple named Jephtha Fitch and Chloe Perkins Fitch were among its longest tenured residents. They began renting a room in the mid-1790s and lived onsite for more than a decade.¹

Jephtha and Chloe were married by Reverend Samuel Stillman of Boston's First Baptist Church in January 1774. At the time, Chloe was enslaved by a local doctor named William Perkins and Jephtha was enslaved by the notorious slave trader Timothy Fitch.² Little is known of their respective lives prior to 1774. Chloe was born in Boston and likely spent her youth doing domestic work in the Perkins household.³ The Perkinses lived in a sizeable home on Middle Street, not far from where Chloe would one day board with her husband.⁴ Dr. Perkins was a well-respected physician but sided with the British during the American Revolution. He fled to Nova Scotia two years after Chloe's

marriage.⁵ It is unclear if Perkins formally emancipated Chloe prior to this point. If not, she was essentially freed when her enslaver left the country and never returned.

Much like Chloe, little is known of Jephtha's early years. He was born in Boston and probably worked as a domestic servant while enslaved by the Fitch family.⁶ Timothy Fitch was one of the wealthiest men in the city, largely due to his involvement in the slave trade. He owned several ships that traded New England-made goods for people in West Africa. These captives were then trafficked across the Atlantic and sold in colonies like Barbados, South Carolina, and Massachusetts.⁷ It does not appear the Jephtha was ever emancipated by Fitch. He likely remained in bondage until slavery gradually came to an end in Massachusetts in the 1780s.

Jephtha and Chloe lived in relative poverty in the two decades following their marriage. For example, they did not own enough personal property to appear in the Boston tax rolls until 1796. That year, they were first listed at the boarding house on Prince Street. Jephtha and Chloe roomed at this location, on and off, for the next fifteen years.⁸ Such longevity was not uncommon when it came to boarders in the North End. Indeed, the Fitches were part of a core group of Black tenants who called the boarding house home during this period.⁹ The relationships formed with these other renters likely provided Jephtha and Chloe with a sense of comfort and community.

The Fitches lived on Prince Street well into their old age. Around 1810, however, their financial situation began to deteriorate. After this point, the couple were regularly in and out of the Boston Almshouse, a sprawling institution on the west side of town that took care of the city's poor. It was in the almshouse that both Chloe and Jephtha died. Chloe passed away in August 1815, and her husband followed three years later. They were both laid to rest in the South Burying Yard.¹⁰

1. It is possible to track the Fitch's tenancy in the North End through analyzing the Ward 4 and Ward 3 taking books over time. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)

2. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages From 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 87.[↵](#)

3. Admission record for Chloe Fitch, April 12, 1814, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society.[↵](#)

4. "Tomorrow Evening at 5 O'Clock," *The Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, Nov. 25, 1765.[↵](#)

5. Albert Matthews, "Dr. William Lee Perkins," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 20 (1917-1919): 10.[↵](#)

6. Admission record for Jephtha Fitch, March 2, 1815, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society.[↵](#)

7. Sean D. Moore, *Slavery and the Making of Early American Libraries: British Literature, Political Thought, and the Transatlantic Book Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 52-56.[↵](#)

8. Analysis of the Ward 4 and Ward 3 taking books from 1796 – 1811. Due to boundary shifts, the boarding house went from being listed in Ward 3 to Ward 4 in the early nineteenth century. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)

9. Analysis of the Ward 4 and Ward 3 taking books from 1796 – 1811, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

10. Entries for Chloe and Jephtha Fitch, Deaths Registered in the City of Boston (Listed Alphabetically) from 1801 to 1848 Inclusive. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

Francis Rental Property

Home of Richard Sparks and Sophia Bean Sparks

Approximate modern address: 225 North Street
Historic street name: Fish Street

Near this spot stood a rental property owned by Joseph Francis, a white wharfinger (or wharf owner). It was once home to an African American couple named Richard Sparks and Sophia Bean Sparks. The pair moved in shortly after their marriage in September 1803.¹ At the time, this area looked much different than it does today. For example, there were no other streets between North Street and the harbor. The area was instead full of warehouses and stores associated with the nearby wharves.²

Richard was a truckman and employed by his landlord. Francis' wharf was located directly behind the Sparks' home. He specialized in importing firewood, and Richard likely spent his days hauling cartloads of the stuff around the North End.³ Unfortunately, nothing is known about Sophia's life, other than the fact that she gave birth to a daughter named Sophia in 1811. Tragedy struck the family a year later when the baby and her father were both stricken with tuberculosis. They died with a week of each other in November 1812 and were buried in the Black section of Copp's Hill Burying Ground.⁴ Today, theirs are among the hundreds of unmarked graves located along the western edge of the graveyard. It is unknown what became of Sophia following the tragic deaths of her husband and daughter.

1. *Documents of the City of Boston, For the Year 1902 in Four Volumes* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 204.

The pair were first listed at the property in 1804. "Taking Book Ward No. 3, 1804," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1804 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 11*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

2. Analysis based on J.G. Hales' 1814 "Map of Boston in the State of Massachusetts" and data from the 1798 Direct Tax. [↵](#)

3. Francis' probate listed his wares in detail. Probate of Joseph Francis, Sept. 14, 1812, no. 24023, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org. [↵](#)

4. Boston death records included information on Richard and Sophia, Jr.'s dates of birth and death. Entries for "Sparks," Boston Index of Deaths 1810 – 1848, vol. P- Z. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

Smithwick Property

Home of Waterford and Rose Smithwick

Approximate modern address: Lewis Street where it intersects with North Street

Historic street name: Fish Street

This site was once home to an enslaved couple named Waterford and Rose Smithwick. They lived here with their enslavers, James Smithwick and Mary Connell Smithwick, during the Revolutionary era. James was a prosperous sea captain who emigrated to Boston from County Wexford in 1763, while Mary was likely born in Massachusetts to Irish parents.¹ Nothing is known about the early lives of Waterford or Rose. The pair first appeared in the historical record in 1777 when they announced their intention to marry.²

Around this time, slavery was increasingly viewed as incompatible with the ideals of the American Revolution, and many Massachusetts enslavers emancipated the people they held in bondage. Indeed, the institution was in such decline that a growing number of people mistakenly believed that the state had outlawed slavery.³ In reality, slavery had by no means disappeared in revolutionary Massachusetts; the institution remained legal and many enslavers continued to view the people they held in bondage as property to be bought and sold, regardless of any rhetoric about rights or equality. Waterford and Rose Smithwick found this out firsthand after the disappearance—and likely death—of James Smithwick in 1778.

In early 1778, James was tasked with transporting the Revolutionary War double agent Benjamin Church into exile in the West Indies. His ship left Boston in mid-February and was never heard from again.⁴ With James presumed dead, Mary was left to settle his estate. Although more and more enslavers were freeing the people they held in bondage during this period, Mary elected to sell Waterford and Rose. In December 1779, they were sold for a total sum of £90.0.0.⁵ It is unknown who purchased the couple or if they were able to remain together. Rose apparently died by June 1787, when Waterford—by now a free man—married a woman named Tamar Philips.⁶ The newlyweds settled in South Boston by early 1791.⁷

The following year, Waterford was the victim of a violent assault near Market Square. While walking along Exchange Lane in mid-April, he was attacked by three white men who “knocked him down & strangled him.” The beating left Waterford “disordered in body [and] insane in mind,” and he ended his life a month later by walking into Boston Harbor. No one was charged in connection with Waterford’s assault or death.⁸ His fate exemplified the dangers faced by free people of color in Boston, as well as the state’s disinterest in securing justice for Black victims of violent crime.

1. Edward Thomas McCarron, “The World of Kavanagh and Cottril: A Portrait of Irish Emigration, Entrepreneurship, and Ethnic Diversity in Mid-Maine, 1760-1820,” Ph.D. diss. (University of New Hampshire, 1992), 69; Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston: 1604-1943*, vol. I (Sheed & Ward, 1944), 354.↵

2. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 440.↵

3. [Blanck, *Tyrannicide*, 103.](#) ↵

4. J. L. Bell, “The Last Days of Dr. Benjamin Church,” *Boston 1775*, accessed May 28, 2026, <https://boston1775.blogspot.com/2009/11/last-days-of-dr-benjamin-church.html>.↵

5. Probate file of James Smithwick, 1779, case no. 17114, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate Records.[↵](#)

6. *Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809*, 106.[↵](#)

7. “Taking Book Ward No. 10, 1791,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1791*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

8. Randolph Roth and Cornelia Hughes Dayton, eds., “Massachusetts homicides, 1791-1797,” *The Ohio State University Criminal Justice Research Center*, October 2009, <https://cjrc.osu.edu/research/interdisciplinary/hvd/united-states/colonial-revolutionary-new-england>.[↵](#)

Lobb Rental Property

Home of Joseph Pernell, Peter Jessamine, Guadalupe, John Pero, John Francis, and Victor Villeneuve

Approximate modern address: 270-274 North Street
Historic street name: Fish Street

On this site stood a one-story shop owned by Mary Lobb (née Connell).¹ The forty-seven-year-old Lobb had remade herself as a shopkeeper after legally separating from her second husband, George Lobb, in 1781. Such a move was unusual for eighteenth-century Boston, especially for someone from an Irish Catholic background.² In the early 1790s, Lobb stepped away from shopkeeping and began renting out her old store. The space was occupied by a series of Black tenants for the next ten-plus years.

Lobb’s building was used as both shop space and apartments. For example, in 1790 it was rented by Joseph Pernell and Peter Jessamine. Both men lived onsite, and Pernell used part of the building for a barbershop.³ Indeed, Pernell was one of six Black barbers who lived and worked at Lobb’s property from 1790 until her death in 1816.⁴ Black men dominated the barbering trade during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many of these individuals had learned their craft while still in bondage, caring for the hair and personal hygiene of their enslavers. Once freed, they promoted such experience to build their own businesses. On the one hand, they could point to years of practical experience shaving, cutting, and styling hair. On the other hand, they could also highlight their expertise with the more interpersonal aspects of barbering, like keeping their customers comfortable and following orders.⁵

By the time Lobb began renting her old shop, an increasing number of Boston’s Black barbers were from the French West Indies. Black West Indians from colonies like Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) and Martinique began arriving in the United States in the early 1780s. Their numbers grew significantly after the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, as thousands of people fled the violence that engulfed Saint-Domingue. Some Black West Indians were free and came to the United States in search of a better life. Others were brought by their enslavers and had no say in the matter.⁶

At least four of the six barbers who rented Lobb’s shop were from French colonies in the Caribbean.⁷ Such a high percentage raises interesting questions about Lobb’s connection to this community. Her near-exclusive renting to Black West Indians was perhaps an act of Catholic solidarity. Like Lobb, Boston’s West Indian residents tended to be (at least nominally) Roman

Catholic. Indeed, two of her lessees—John Pero and Victor Villeneuve—were members of Lobb’s church.⁸ While no longer strictly Puritan, Boston was not exactly welcoming to Catholics during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Perhaps Lobb was one of the only landlords willing to consistently rent to Black men of that faith.

1. The shop was purchased by her first husband, James Smithwick, in 1772. Richard Alexander, et al, grantors, to James Smithwick, grantee, July 9, 1772, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 121, page 231. [↵](#)

2. Mary was the daughter of an Irish Catholic transplant to Boston named Patrick Connell, although it is unknown whether she herself was born in Ireland or Massachusetts. It is also worth mentioning that Mary was a member of an Anglican congregation in Boston until (re)converting to her father’s faith in the late 1780s. George F. O’Dwyer, “Historical Gleanings from Massachusetts Records,” *The Journal of the Irish American Historical Society* XVIII (1919): 221-222; J.L. Bell, “The End of Mary Lobb’s Marriage,” *Boston 1775*, November 30, 2009, <https://boston1775.blogspot.com/2009/11/end-of-mary-lobbs-marriage.html> (accessed July 11, 2024). [↵](#)

3. “List of Ward No. 3,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

4. Comparisons of Ward No. 3 taking lists from 1790 – 1798, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

5. Douglas Walter Bristol, *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 9-11. [↵](#)

6. Bristol, *Knights of the Razor*, 34. [↵](#)

7. They were, in order:

A man known only as “Guadalope” who was mentioned in the Ward 3 taking books from 1792-1793, and again in the records of the 1798 Direct Tax. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States’ Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 173.

Another was named Jean Pierre Perault, better known as John Pero. For more on this individual, please see the entry in the map devoted to the Pero family (property at the corner of Prince Street and North Square).

The third barber was John Francis, who was listed in Ward 2 (ward boundaries shifted in 1806) taking books from 1810 – 1814.

The last West Indian barber to rent Lobb’s shop during her lifetime was Victor Villeneuve, who was listed at the address in the 1816 Boston directory. *The Boston Directory* (Boston: E. Colton, 1816), 232. [↵](#)

8. William C. Leonard, “Growing Together: Blacks and the Catholic Church in Boston,” *The Historian* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 269. [↵](#)

Skillin Property

Home and workplace of Richard Cushing
Approximate modern address: 266 Commercial Street
Historic street name: Ship Street

This is the approximate site of Simeon and John Skillins' house. The brothers were some of the best-known wood carvers in the early republic and purchased this site—later part of the larger property known as Skillins Wharf—in 1781.¹ Three years later, a Black man named Richard Cushing was recorded living with the brothers.² It is unknown whether Cushing worked in the Skillins' shop, but it's possible that he assisted in carving some of their works. At any rate, his time with the brothers was apparently brief, and he disappeared from the historical record after 1784.

1. William Shepard, grantor, to John Skillin, grantee, August 1781, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Register of Deeds, vol. 133, pp. 49.[↵](#)

2. "Taking Book Ward No. 3, 1784," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1784*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

Union Wharf

Approximate modern address: Union Wharf
Historic street name: Located off Ship Street

In October 1797, the *Peace and Plenty* docked at Union Wharf after a voyage from St. Croix. Within a few days, its captain notified the press that his "black boy" had escaped from the ship. He did not include the name of the "boy," but noted that he was fifteen years old, "stout," and originally from the French colony of Martinique.¹ It is unclear whether the child was enslaved, or a servant bound by some type of contract. Both types of mariners were known to jump ship in Massachusetts after the Commonwealth abolished slavery. It is likewise unknown if the Martinican sailor was apprehended or if he successfully eluded his former captain, perhaps finding refuge in the North End's growing West Indian community.

1. "Stop Runaways," *Columbian Centinel (Boston)*, Nov. 1, 1797.[↵](#)

Tenement Building

Home of Charles Cummins and Sarah Smith Cummins
Approximate modern address: 308 North Street
Historic street name: Ship Street

A tenement building stood on this lot during the late eighteenth century. Among its tenants was a laborer named Charles Cummins. He lived here for around six years, until married life drew him away in the mid-1790s.

It is not known where or when Cummins was born. Tax records show that he was living here by May 1789. Cummins was one of three unmarried African American men who called the building home.¹ This was typical for North End tenement buildings and boarding houses at the time. Their

residents were often young, single men who worked on the waterfront. According to historians James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, “close comradeships” developed between these types of boarders. Housemates routinely pooled their resources to help those in financial need or offered their protection if someone crossed the wrong person in a tavern or gambling den. Indeed, single life in the North End was characterized by a type of rowdiness that was less prevalent elsewhere in Boston. The more middle-class Black neighborhood in the West End was seen as the place to go when wanting to settle down and start a family (although plenty of families also lived in the boarding houses of the North End). Once a boarder got married, it was often only a matter of time before they were “lost to the hill.”² Cummins was “lost to the hill” after marrying a woman named Sarah Smith in 1796.³ Within two years of their marriage, the couple had relocated to Cambridge Street in the heart of Beacon Hill’s African American community.⁴ However, their time on “the hill” was apparently short, as they disappeared from the historical record after 1801.

1. The others were Joseph Pernell and Pollydore Skillin. Boston marriage records show that these men did not marry until later. “Ward No. 3 List for 1789,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1789 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 11*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)

2. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1999), 24-25. [↵](#)

3. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 162.[↵](#)

4. “Taking Book Ward No. 7, 1798,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1798 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)

Spear Boarding House

Home of Cesar Spear and Chloe Bradford Spear

Approximate modern address: Behind 23 Harris Street
Historic street name: White Bread Alley

On this spot stood a boarding house owned by Cesar Spear and Chloe Bradford Spear. Although the property technically belonged to both husband and wife, it was mainly Chloe who handled its operation. Indeed, by the time of her death in 1815, she had transformed the property into a profitable business venture and a center of religious life in the North End.

Much of what we know about Chloe comes from a memoir published seventeen years after her death. Its author identified herself only as a “Lady of Boston” who attended the same church as Chloe.¹ The book may not be entirely accurate, but certain key facts line up with other historical records.² According to the memoir, Chloe was born in West Africa around 1749. When she was twelve years old, Chloe and three of her friends were abducted by slave traders as they played on a beach outside their village. The children were forced onto a ship bound for Philadelphia, where Chloe was purchased by John Bradford, a ship’s captain from Boston.³ She spent the next two decades enslaved by the Bradfords, doing all manner of domestic work in their North End mansion. Ironically, during this time she and the Bradfords attended the Fifth Church of Boston on North Street, just steps away from her future home in White Bread Alley.⁴

Chloe married Cesar Spear in October 1776.⁵ Her new husband was enslaved by Nathan Spear, a cooper who kept a shop near Faneuil Hall.⁶ Cesar likely worked in Spear's shop during his years in bondage, as he later went into the coopering trade himself.⁷ It is unclear if Nathan Spear emancipated Cesar after his marriage, but Chloe remained enslaved by the Bradfords for several more years. She later recalled reaching some type of agreement with Captain Bradford about her eventual emancipation, but slavery was outlawed in Massachusetts before it went into effect.⁸

By 1784, Chloe and Cesar were free and living in a Fish Street boarding house.⁹ In addition to renting a room, the couple also helped run the establishment. All the while, Chloe laundered clothing for families all around the North End and Cesar continued working as a cooper.¹⁰ Apart from his various jobs, Cesar also became involved in the social life of Boston's Black community. For example, he joined the all-Black Masonic lodge founded by the prominent abolitionist Prince Hall.¹¹ In 1787, he helped Hall draft a petition to the Massachusetts legislature. The content of this document sheds some light on Cesar and Chloe's hopes for the future.

The petition asked the state government to fund a project that would resettle Black families in West Africa. It was written in response to the "very disagreeable and disadvantageous circumstances" that such families continued to face in Massachusetts even after the abolition of slavery.¹² These types of immigration plans were discussed in numerous Northern cities at the time, as many free African Americans gave up hope that they would ever enjoy equal rights in the United States. A book published by a British abolitionist in 1786 seemed to offer a solution to their troubles. The text argued that it would be best for everyone if free people of color were sent "back" to Africa—ignoring the fact that many were generations removed from the continent.¹³ Interestingly, Cesar was married to someone who was indeed from West Africa. His role in crafting the document suggests that Chloe was interested in returning "home" as of 1787. Unfortunately for the dozens of people who signed the document, nothing came of their appeal.

Perhaps resigned to staying in Boston, Chloe focused her energy on one day owning her own boarding house. This dream was finally realized in September 1798 when she and Cesar bought the rear portion of a new building in White Bread Alley.¹⁴ Although the deed listed them as co-owners, the property was purchased with \$700 that Chloe had saved on her own.¹⁵ According to historian Margot Minardi, this type of financial arrangement was not abnormal for the time. There tended to be a more consistent demand for jobs associated with women than there did for those associated with men, so Black families often relied on women like Chloe for financial stability.¹⁶

The Spears began taking in boarders around 1801.¹⁷ Census records suggest that their tenants were primarily African Americans, probably laborers and sailors who worked on the nearby waterfront.¹⁸ After Cesar died from an unknown illness five years later, Chloe was left to run the establishment on her own.¹⁹ Under Chloe's sole direction, the property became more community focused. It still functioned as a boarding house, but also became a well-known site for religious meetings. Chloe had converted to the Baptist faith by this point, although she did not join the African Baptist Church on Beacon Hill. Instead, she was a member of the Second Baptist Church, an interracial congregation located off of Salem Street. The meetings at Chloe's boarding house were likewise attended by Black and white Bostonians alike.²⁰

Chloe died in January 1815, at around sixty-five years of age. Her probate file reveals that she was in possession of a considerable estate—especially for an African American woman at the time.²¹ Chloe's status in Boston was also evident in the fact that her obituary was printed in no less than five city newspapers.²²

1. A Lady of Boston, *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, A Native of Africa* (Boston: James Loring, 1832).[↗](#)

2. For example, the chapter on Chloe buying a house includes information that is verifiable through Boston property records. [↵](#)
3. A Lady of Boston, *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear*, 9-15. [↵](#)
4. Vincent Caretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 38; Richard J. Boles, *Dividing the Faith: The Rise of Segregated Churches in the Early American North* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), retrieved from books.google.com. [↵](#)
5. Entry for Cesar Spear and Cloe Bradford, Oct. 1776, Boston Marriage Records. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)
6. William and Martha Brattle, grantors, to Nathan Spear, grantee, March 16, 1763, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 97, pp. 178. [↵](#)
7. Indeed, he was probably one of several enslaved people who worked in Spear's shop. In 1777, an attorney named Perez Morton ran afoul of Spear when he encouraged one of this "negro lads" to sue for his freedom. James Spear Loring, "Spear Family Record," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 18 (1864): 160. [↵](#)
8. A Lady of Boston, *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear*, 47-48. [↵](#)
9. "Taking Book No. 5," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1784 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)
10. A Lady of Boston, *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear*, 52-54. [↵](#)
11. Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 120. [↵](#)
12. Petition of Samuel [sic] Stevens, Jan. 4, 1787, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, House Unpassed Legislation, 1787, Docket 2358, SC1/series 230, Massachusetts Archives, Boston, Mass. [↵](#)
13. John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 330. [↵](#)
14. Martha Hickman, grantor, to Chloe and Cesar Spear, grantees, Sept. 5, 1798, vol. 190, pp. 153. [↵](#)
15. A Lady of Boston, *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear*, 57. [↵](#)
16. Minardi, *Making Slavery History*, 120. [↵](#)
17. "List of Ward No. 2, May 1801," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1802 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)
18. As of 1810, nineteen people of color lived at the property. 1810 U.S. Census, Ward No. 2, Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, enumerated Aug. 6, 1810, page 18. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

19. Probate Records of Cesar Spear, 1806, no. 22662, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org.[↵](#)

20. A Lady of Boston, *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear*, 71-72.[↵](#)

21. Probate Records of Chloe Spear, 1815, no. 24579, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org. [↵](#)

22. These were: *The Boston Patriot*, the *Repertory*, the *New-England Palladium*, the *Independent Chronicle*, and the *Boston Daily Advertiser*.[↵](#)

Vinson Tenement Building

Home of Worcester Emanuel, Cato Newell, and William Hall

Approximate modern address: Rear portion of 350 North Street

Historic street name: White Bread Alley

A tenement sat on this lot during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From 1794 – 1802, it belonged to John Vinson, a white absentee landlord from Weymouth, Massachusetts.¹ During Vinson’s tenure, the three-story building enjoyed something of a seedy reputation. In 1798, for example, a tax assessor described its inhabitants as “Nymphs[,] Negroes, &c.”²

The identities of the supposed “Nymphs” (presumably female sex workers) who lived in the boarding house are lost to history. However, the names of several Black tenants from around this time are known. Worcester Emanuel, Cato Newell, and William Hall were likely among the people of color noted by the assessor.³

Emanuel had recently moved to Boston from Brookline, Massachusetts. In January 1797, he and a woman named Jane Gerry—also from Brookline—were married by Reverend Samuel Stillman of Boston’s First Baptist Church. Gerry may have also lived in the White Bread Alley tenement with her husband.⁴ Cato Newell was an African-born laborer who likely worked on the nearby wharves. He was admitted to the Boston Almshouse—an institution that cared for the town’s poor—immediately after his stay in Vinson’s tenement building.⁵ Hall, meanwhile, had previously been employed at the Bunch-of-Grapes, a well-known tavern on State Street.⁶ It is unknown what he did in the North End.

Tax records do not show any Black boarders at the Vinson property after 1800. This does not necessarily mean that people of color stopped renting rooms in the tenement. After all, tax records only listed Bostonians that owned more than a set amount of personal property. However, this was right around the time that Chloe and Cesar Spear opened their boarding house across the street. It is certainly possible that this new establishment, run by a Black couple who lived on-site, drew in boarders who otherwise may have rented from Vinson.

1. In Samuel Clough’s 1798 atlas showing Boston’s property owners, Vinson was identified as “Vincent” (both spellings were used in the eighteenth century). Samuel Clough, 1798 Boston Atlas, Block 700, no. 13, Massachusetts Historical Society.

John Vinson purchased the property in question from his brother Thomas. Thomas Vinson, grantor, to John Vinson, grantee, Dec. 26, 1794, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 179, page 162.

John Vinson sold the property in 1802. John Vinson, grantor, to Elijah Turner et al, grantees, Jul. 20, 1802, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 201, page 277.[↵](#)

2. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States' Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 133.[↵](#)

3. These individuals were listed in the 1799 taking book for the Second Ward. "List of Ward 2," May 1799, *City of Boston Tax Records, 1799 Tax Book, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)

4. This information was contained in Worcester Emanuel's marriage record. *Documents of the City of Boston, For the Year 1902*, vol. IV (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 79. [↵](#)

5. Admission record for Cato Newell, Apr. 23, 1798, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society.[↵](#)

6. The 1790 taking book showed him working for Dudley Coleman, the proprietor of the Bunch-of-Grapes. "List of Ward No. 9," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790 Tax Book, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)

Condemned Tenement Building

Home of Salem Poor and Sarah Stevens Poor

Approximate modern address: 13 N Hanover Court
Historic street name: White Bread Alley

Near this spot stood an eighteenth-century tenement building. Most of its residents were poor, even by the standards of rental properties in the North End.¹ Their ranks included both Black and white Bostonians.² As noted by historian Jacqueline Barbara Carr, racially integrated housing was not uncommon, especially in the 1780s and 1790s. It became less so after 1800 as people of color increasingly clustered in communities like West Boston, Robinson's Alley, or—on a much smaller scale—individual boarding houses owned by African Americans. These spaces provided insulation (however limited) from a majority-white city that was growing more and more hostile toward its growing Black population.³

The best-known resident of this boarding house was Salem Poor. Born around 1747, he spent the first twenty-two years of his life enslaved by the Poor family of Andover, Massachusetts. Poor purchased his freedom in July 1769 and enlisted in the militia six years later after the Battles of Lexington and Concord. He was among the thousands of Black soldiers—free and enslaved—who fought for the American cause during the Revolution. Poor served with particular distinction at the Battle of Bunker Hill in July 1775. As British forces overwhelmed the American positions, Poor delayed his retreat to help the wounded. He was also credited with firing the shot that mortally wounded British Lieutenant Colonel James Abercrombie. Poor's conduct earned him the praise of his officers, who

petitioned the Massachusetts legislature and requested they officially recognize his bravery. The petition was apparently ignored.⁴

Poor was discharged from the military in early 1780 and moved to Boston's North End.⁵ Sadly, his status as a war hero was largely forgotten by this point and Poor soon experienced the crushing debt and poverty that impacted so many North Enders.⁶ By May 1788, he and his new wife—a white woman named Sarah Stevens—had moved into boarding house in White Bread Alley.⁷ There, they lived with other down-on-their-luck tenants like James Hindley, a journeyman blacksmith who tax records described as “sick + poor.”⁸

It is unclear how long the Poores lived in the White Bread Alley boarding house. They would have moved out by late 1794 when the aging structure was torn down.⁹ Poor remained in Boston for the remainder of his life. His final years were marked by the end of his marriage, time spent in the Boston Almshouse—a facility that cared for the town's poorest residents—and a short stint in jail for breach of the peace. Poor died in February 1802 and was laid to rest in the section of Copp's Hill Burying Ground reserved for people of color. As with so many of these graves, Poor's was unmarked.¹⁰

1. Assessment based on boarders who later were committed to the Boston Almshouse. Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society. [↵](#)

2. In 1784, for example, two white men boarded with the formerly enslaved Caesar Gyles. “Taking Book Ward No. 2, 1784,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1784 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

3. Jacqueline Barbara Carr, *After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775-1800* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2005), 75-80. [↵](#)

4. “Salem Poor,” *National Park Service: Boston National Historical Park*, Jan. 9, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/people/salem-poor.htm> (accessed July 16, 2024). [↵](#)

5. “Ward No. 5,” *City of Boston Tax Records, AD Abatement Book, 15th Tax, July 1783*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

6. In July 1785, for example, he took out an advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* decrying his wife's “misconduct,” and pledging not to pay for any of her future debts. [↵](#)

7. The pair were married the previous year. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 458. [↵](#)

8. “Ward No. 2, List for 1788,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1788 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

9. The 1794 taking book described the house as “pull'd down.” “List of Ward No. 2, 1794,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1794 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

10. “Salem Poor,” *National Park Service: Boston National Historical Park*, Jan. 9, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/people/salem-poor.htm> (accessed July 16, 2024). [↵](#)

Robinson's Alley

Modern address: Paul Revere Mall, also known as the Prado

An 1887 history of Boston described Robinson's Alley as the one-time "headquarters" of Boston's Black community.¹ Indeed, tax and census records show that this thoroughfare was home to dozens of Black North Enders from the 1780s through the 1840s.²

African Americans began moving to Robinson's Alley around 1787.³ At the time, the alley was mostly vacant, apart from a house owned by the white Cartwright family.⁴ Over the next thirteen years, five Black-owned homes were built along the street, which became informally known as "Negro Alley."⁵ These new houses were modest one-or-two-story structures, typically occupied by individual families. However, it was not uncommon for these families to take in boarders. As anti-Black sentiment in Boston remained high, Black renters from all around the North End turned their attention toward the growing Black neighborhood between North and Unity Streets.⁶

Properties in Robinson's Alley typically only stayed within a given family for one or two generations. This was due to numerous factors. Some individuals were forced to sell their homes after running into financial difficulties. Others died without any heirs and had their properties scooped up at auction. Still others were able to leave their homes to their children, only to have them sell their inheritances and move away.⁷

By the 1830s, all the houses on the north side of Robinson's Alley had passed out of their original families (except for the Cartwright property). Not only that, but they were all transformed into tenement buildings and boarding houses, most of which were owned by absentee landlords with no ties to the community.⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was around this time that the neighborhood went into decline. Its neglected and aging buildings were crowded with lower-income tenants and the alley soon became infamous for its crime and unsanitary conditions.⁹

It was also during this period that the alley's demographics began to shift. Mirroring changes in the North End more generally, it became a majority immigrant community after the mid-nineteenth century, first Irish then Italian.¹⁰ The alley's time as a residential area came to a sudden end in the 1930s after Boston Mayor James Michael Curley announced plans to transform the "ill smelling and filthy" street into a walking mall.¹¹ All of the buildings along Robinson's Alley were demolished in 1933, erasing any traces of its historic Black neighborhood that may have survived to that point.¹² The mall—inspired by Havana's Paseo del Prado—opened to the public a year later and was officially named in honor of Paul Revere in 1935.¹³

1. Edward Griffin Porter, *Rambles in Old Boston, New England* (Boston: Cupples & Hurd, 1887), 229-230.[↩]

2. This approximate figure is based on an examination of Boston tax records from 1788 – 1821 and U.S. Census records from 1800 – 1840.[↩]

3. John Brown was apparently the first Black property owner to move to the alley. Sarah Larrabee, grantor, to John Brown, grantee, Jun. 30, 1787, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 160, page 196.[↩]

4. This assessment is based on analysis of historic maps and tax records for Ward 1. George Smith after John Bonner, "The Town of Boston in New England by Capt. John Bonner, 1722," 1835,

Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.; J.G. Hales, "Map of Boston in the State of Massachusetts," 1814, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [↵](#)

5. It was first referred to as Negro Alley in a newspaper story from 1801. "Direct Tax," *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 29, 1801.

Please see the individual profiles in Robinson's Alley for more information on these homeowners. [↵](#)

6. According to U.S. Census data, its growth was especially significant between 1800 and 1810.

It is also worth mentioning a popular story that Robinson's Alley burned to the ground in 1815, supposedly amidst celebrations of the American victory in the War of 1812. The tale dates to at least 1898, but there is no evidence from the time showing a conflagration on that scale. There may have indeed been a fire, but more contained than commonly remembered. "Around Copp's Hill," *The Sunday Herald*, Jan. 30, 1898. [↵](#)

7. Please see the individual profiles plotted along Robinson's Alley for more detailed information. [↵](#)

8. Please see the individual profiles plotted along Robinson's Alley for more detailed information. [↵](#)

9. It kept this reputation through the early twentieth century. "Plans Under Way for Demolition of City's Most Congested Slum District," *Boston City Record*, May 16, 1925. [↵](#)

10. Jane Holtz Kay, *Lost Boston* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 236. [↵](#)

11. "Plans Under Way for Demolition of City's Most Congested Slum District," *Boston City Record*, May 16, 1925. [↵](#)

12. "White Fund Trustees Agree to Spend \$400,000 for Prado in North End," *Boston Herald*, May 13, 1933. [↵](#)

13. "City to Acquire North End Prado," *The Boston Herald*, Aug. 29, 1934; "No. End Prado Named Paul Revere Mall," *The Boston Herald*, Feb. 19, 1935. [↵](#)

Byles Property

Home of Bristol

Approximate modern address: 5 Tileston Place

Historic street name: Love Lane

An enslaved man named Bristol was living at this site when he was emancipated in 1781. Unfortunately, almost nothing is known about Bristol's background. By 1769, he was enslaved by Samuel Hunt, a shipwright from Watertown, and when Hunt died in 1774, he left Bristol to his daughter, Mary Hunt Byles. She and her husband, Josias Byles, lived in the house that once stood on this site.¹

Bristol was enslaved by the Byles family for around seven years. In 1781, Mary freed Bristol in her will, noting that he had been enslaved by her family for "a great number of years."² Bristol was one of a growing number of enslaved people in Massachusetts who were manumitted during this era as

slavery was increasingly seen as contradictory to the ideals of the American Revolution. It is unknown what became of Bristol after his emancipation.

1. Probate file of Samuel Hunt, 1774, Case No. 12288, Middlesex County Probate Records. [↵](#)

2. Probate file of Mary Byles, 1781, Case No. 17351, Suffolk County Probate Records. [↵](#)

Riggins-Grimes House

Home of Job Riggins and George Grimes

Approximate modern address: Between 4 Tileston Place and the south side of Paul Revere Mall
Historic street name: Robison's Alley

Near this spot stood a house shared by Job Riggins and George Grimes. Riggins built the structure around 1820 after converting his previous home, the Greenough property across the street, into tenements.¹ The new dwelling consisted of two “ten-foot buildings”—relatively small, one-story structures—joined together. Riggins lived in one half of the new house, Grimes in the other.²

Unfortunately, little is known of Grimes' early life. He was first recorded in Boston in May 1819, a year before moving to Robinson's Alley.³ Initially a laborer, Grimes began working as a grain measurer around 1825.⁴ To quote one of his Boston colleagues, grain measurers were “umpire[s] between the buyer[s] and seller[s] of grain.”⁵ If someone paid for a certain amount of corn, for example, they could hire Grimes to weigh their purchase and make sure they weren't shortchanged. Grimes was evidently successful at his new job, as he saved up enough money to buy his home from Riggins in 1827.⁶

Outside of his work, Grimes was an active member of Boston's Black community. As early as 1822, he had joined the African Society, a charitable organization that provided mutual aid for its members and promoted causes like African American education.⁷ The society was perhaps best known for hosting Boston's annual July 14th celebrations. These festivities marked the 1808 abolition of the Atlantic slave trade by Great Britain and the United States and consisted of speeches and parades through the streets of Beacon Hill. Grimes was regularly a member of the committee that organized the day's events, along with community leaders like Primus Hall.⁸ Indeed, when Grimes died in 1832, it was Hall who handled his estate, a fact that hints at a close relationship between the two men. Part of Hall's duties involved compiling an inventory of his deceased friend's property. This document provides a unique glimpse into the furnishings of a ten-foot building. Stuffed within the confines of this cramped, single-story structure were a desk, two tables, five chairs, one chest of drawers, two trunks, and a “gin case,” or liquor cabinet.⁹

Riggins outlived his neighbor and former tenant by seven years. By the early 1830s, he had emerged as a leader in Boston's Black community. Since the colonial era, Black communities throughout New England had elected their own “governors” or “kings.” To quote historian Kristin Waters, these men “meted out punishments and upheld law and order” within their communities in addition to mediating relations with local whites.¹⁰ The practice of electing Black governors and kings was dying out by the early nineteenth century, but evidently continued in Boston through the 1830s. Riggins, for example, took office as “King Riggins” after the death of Richard Cephias—commonly known as King Dick—in 1831.¹¹

When he died in 1839, Riggins was given an appropriately regal funeral. An elegant coach transported his casket from Robinson's Alley all the way across town to the South Burying Ground.¹² This was perhaps an unlikely sendoff for someone born into slavery in Georgia, but illustrated the opportunities that Boston could offer to free people of color. As for Riggins' real estate, it was bought up by white landlords within a decade of his death.¹³

1. "Valuation Book Ward No. 1, 1820," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1820 Valuation Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)

2. This arrangement was described in Riggins' probate information. Probate Records of Job Riggins, 1839, no. 32360, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org. [↵](#)

3. Grimes was married in Boston in May 1819. Marriage record of George Grimes and Hope Miller, May 16, 1819, Marriages Registered in Boston, Boston Marriages, 1800-1849 vol. 1. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

4. He was listed as such in the 1825 Boston city directory. *Boston Directory, 1825* (Boston: C. Stimpson, Jr. and J.H.A. Frost, 1825), 293.[↵](#)

5. "Charles Bradford," *Boston Patriot & Daily Mercantile Advertiser*, March 24, 1820. [↵](#)

6. Job and Hagar Riggins, grantors, to George Grimes, grantee, Jun. 18, 1827, Suffolk County Property Records, vol. 318, page 301.[↵](#)

7. "African Celebration," *New-England Palladium & Commercial Advertiser (Boston)*, Jul 16, 1822.[↵](#)

8. "Notice," *Boston Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser (Boston)*, Jul. 14, 1826.[↵](#)

9. Probate Records of George Grimes, Jun. 18, 1832, no. 29920, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org. [↵](#)

10. Kristin Waters, *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022), retrieved from books.google.com. [↵](#)

11. Scott Hancock, "Claiming the Courtroom: Space, Race, and Law, 1808-1856," in *"We Shall Independent Be": African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, eds. (Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 152-155.

Riggins was remembered as "King Riggin" in an 1860 article about life in the North End thirty years earlier. "The North End," *Boston Evening Transcript*, Jan. 3, 1860. [↵](#)

12. Probate Records of Job Riggins, 1839, no. 32360, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org.[↵](#)

13. Riggins' will left his real estate to friends Joseph Young and Smith Coburn. Young sold his stake in the property in 1840. Coburn's son George (having inherited his father's property) did the same eight years later. Joseph Young, grantor, to Matthias Ellis, grantee, Jul. 17, 1840, Suffolk County

Property Records, vol. 457, page 200; George E. Coburn, grantor, to Henry J. Oliver, grantee, Mar. 7, 1848, Suffolk County Property Records, vol. 587, page 277.[↵](#)

Gardner Property

Home of Primus Gardner
Approximate modern address: 21 N. Bennet Street
Historic street name: N. Bennet Street

The home of Joseph Gardner, a former minister and shopkeeper, stood on this property in the late eighteenth century. In the 1790s, a free Black man named Primus Gardner also lived on the site and probably worked as Joseph's servant.¹ Indeed, it's likely that Primus had once been enslaved by the elderly businessman.

Born in 1713, Joseph grew up in a household with numerous enslaved people. The 1739 will of his father Samuel, for example, left three of his four children "one negro" each; his fourth child was only left out because Samuel had given him "a negro man...already."² After graduating from Harvard in 1732, Joseph embarked upon a brief career as a minister before entering the business world and becoming exceptionally wealthy.³ He enslaved one person as of the recording of the 1771 provincial tax list, but the identity of this individual is unknown.

Primus Gardner first appeared in the historical record in October 1790 when he sued Edward Vale Brown, a North End baker, for failing to pay him for work done on his property. Primus won the case after Brown failed to appear at trial.⁴ Interestingly, the defendant failed to show up because he was already in jail awaiting execution. A few days after Primus won his case, Brown was hanged on the Boston Common for burglary.⁵ It's unknown whether Primus ever recovered the money owed to him, but his case reveals that he likely did odd jobs around the North End in addition to working as Joseph Gardiner's personal servant. Primus was last recorded in Boston tax records in 1794, after which point nothing is known about his life.

1. "Taking Book Ward No. 3, 1790," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

2. Probate file of Samuel Gardner, 1747, case no. 8739, Suffolk County Probate Records.[↵](#)

3. Clifford K. Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, vol. 9 (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1956), 156-159.[↵](#)

4. Suffolk Co. Court of Common Pleas case (search 1790-93).[↵](#)

5. *American Herald and the Washington Gazette (Boston)*, October 18, 1790, pp. 3.[↵](#)

Patterson property

Home of Prince Patterson, Nelly Jackson Patterson, Pierce Patterson, and Elizabeth Cutler Patterson

Approximate modern address: North End Music and Performing Arts Center, Paul Revere Mall
Historic street name: Robinson's Alley

Near this spot stood the home of Prince Patterson. He was born around 1753, possibly in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.¹ He was living in Boston by May 1784 when he married a woman named Nelly Jackson.² The couple moved to the North End shortly thereafter, where they initially lived in a series of boardinghouses.³ Their only child, a son named Pierce, was born around this time.⁴

Prince Patterson was a truckman by trade and likely spent his days hauling goods around the wharves of the North End.⁵ By October 1794, he had saved enough money to purchase land in Robinson's Alley and build a two-story house. The structure was relatively small—only measuring 208 square feet—but surrounded by a sizeable yard.⁶ This surrounding property was likely where Patterson kept his wagons. Between 1797 and 1800, he purchased two horse carts and one hand cart for his business.⁷

Despite the apparent growth of Patterson's trucking operation, he was officially “warned out” of Boston on September 16, 1800.⁸ Warning out had a long history in New England. By law, town governments were required to care for any residents who fell on hard times. This meant that local officials tried to restrict just who qualified for residency. When someone new moved to town, authorities routinely assessed whether they were at risk of ever needing public assistance. If so, they were warned to return to their previous place of residence. Curiously, this did not necessarily mean that newcomers were forced to leave. Warnings could instead function as an official notice that someone was not recognized as a town resident and was therefore not eligible for aid should they ever need it.⁹

In 1788, the Massachusetts legislature passed a new warning out law specifically geared toward people of color. With limited exceptions, Black people from out of state were henceforth banned from settling in the Commonwealth. Those who broke the law risked prison sentences of hard labor, whippings, and—ultimately—removal back to their home states. The act, which essentially defined all African Americans as potential public charges, was passed amidst white fears that too many Black people were moving to Massachusetts.¹⁰ Despite the harsh language of the law, it was not evenly enforced. Indeed, it was not until 1800 that Boston authorities compiled a list of people to warn out. Among the names was Prince Patterson, identified as a former New Hampshire resident.¹¹ Luckily, it does not appear as if any action was ever taken against him. At the very least, he was not forced to leave Boston.

Patterson was apparently widowed within two years of being warned out. In December 1802, he married a woman named Elizabeth Cutler.¹² It was ultimately she who inherited his property when Patterson died in 1806, although she quickly sold it to a real estate developer named Joseph Batson.¹³

Over the next few years, Batson divided the Patterson house into tenements and built two new apartments on the surrounding property.¹⁴ These latter units were so-called “ten-foot buildings,” cramped, one-story structures (hence their name) that were cheap to build and often crowded with lower-income tenants.¹⁵ This was the case with Batson's. As of 1810, one was home to twelve individuals while the other housed thirteen. These renters were all poor and working-class African Americans.¹⁶

Batson's transformation of the Patterson property marked an early step in the decline of Robinson's Alley. Prior to 1810, it was rare for absentee landlords to own homes in the area—most property owners were residents of the neighborhood who had an interest in its well-being. As the nineteenth century wore on, properties along the alley were increasingly bought up by landlords who had no

connection to the community and were mainly concerned with making a profit. This eventually led to a proliferation of neglected and overcrowded rental units.¹⁷

1. Patterson's approximate age was included in his 1806 death record. Entry for Prince Patterson, May 1806, Deaths in Boston, from 1800-1810, vol. 32. Accessed through Ancestry.com.

In 1800, Patterson was warned out of Boston by local authorities. His last place of residence was given as Portsmouth, New Hampshire. "Charles Bulfinch Decree," republished in: Gerald Nelson Davis, "Massachusetts Blacks and the Quest for Education: 1638 to 1860," PhD diss., (University of Massachusetts, 1977), 245. [↵](#)

2. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 97. [↵](#)

3. It is possible to trace the couple's movements through analyzing the Ward 2 and Ward 5 taking books from 1784-1793. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

4. Entry for Pierce Patterson, Aug. 14, 1865, "Deaths Registered in the City of Cambridge for the Year eighteen hundred and sixty-five," Massachusetts Death Records, 1841-1915. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

5. He was regularly listed as such in city taking books. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

6. Patterson purchased adjoining lots in Robinson's Alley in 1794 and 1795. Eben Prout, grantor, to Prince Patterson, grantee, Oct. 7, 1794, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 180, page 94; Amos Winship, grantor, to Prince Patterson, grantee, Mar. 5, 1795, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 180, page 133.

The house and surrounding property were described in the 1798 Direct Tax. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States' Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 154. [↵](#)

7. It is possible to trace the growth of Patterson's business through Ward 2 taking books from 1797 – 1800. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

8. "Charles Bulfinch Decree," republished in: Gerald Nelson Davis, "Massachusetts Blacks and the Quest for Education: 1638 to 1860," PhD diss., (University of Massachusetts, 1977), 245. [↵](#)

9. "Warning Out," *Primary Research: Local History, Closer to Home*, <https://primaryresearch.org/warning-out/> (accessed July 14, 2024). [↵](#)

10. Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29. [↵](#)

11. "Charles Bulfinch Decree," republished in: Gerald Nelson Davis, "Massachusetts Blacks and the Quest for Education: 1638 to 1860," PhD diss., (University of Massachusetts, 1977), 245. [↵](#)

12. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 481. [↵](#)

13. The original deed is lost, but a copy was filed with county authorities in 1818. Elizabeth Cutler, grantor, to Joseph Batson, grantee, Sept. 19, 1809, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 260, page 94.[↵](#)

14. “Real Estate,” *Boston Commercial Gazette*, Oct. 22, 1818.[↵](#)

15. John B. Blake, *Public Health in the Town of Boston, 1630-1822* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 224-225. [↵](#)

16. 1810 U.S. Census, Ward No. 1, Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, enumerated Aug. 6, 1810, page 9. Accessed through Ancestry.com.[↵](#)

17. By 1854, for example, the Alley was known as one of the most “filthy localities” in Boston. “The Cholera,” *Boston Courier*, Jun. 15, 1854. [↵](#)

Harris-Greenough House

Home of William Harris, Mary Harris, and Violet Greenough

Approximate modern address: North End Music and Performing Arts Center, Paul Revere Mall
Historic street name: Robison's Alley

William Harris and Violet Greenough purchased a piece of land around this spot in April 1790.¹ Their exact relationship is unclear, but the pair soon built a small house on the lot and split it down the middle.² The structure was set back from the alley and fronted by a sizeable yard, where Harris and Greenough likely kept farm animals like pigs and chickens.³

Almost nothing is known about Violet Greenough. As of 1790, she was widowed—having once been married to a man named Titus—and around sixty years old.⁴ After she passed away in 1804, her property passed through a quick succession of owners, most of whom only kept it for one or two years. In 1817, the former Greenough estate was purchased Job Riggins.⁵ The sixty-year-old Riggins had been born into slavery in Georgia. He was emancipated in 1804 and, like many other free African Americans in the South, moved north in search of a better life. Riggins worked as a laborer on the Boston waterfront and eventually saved up enough money to buy the Greenough property.⁶ It was the first of three real estate purchases that he made along Robinson’s Alley. In 1819, Riggins bought a plot of land on the opposite side of the street. Three years later, he bought William Harris’ property.⁷

Harris was born around 1742 and married to a woman named Mary by the time he and Greenough purchased their lot in Robinson’s Alley.⁸ Very little is known about Harris, apart from his approximate birth year and the fact that he worked as a laborer.⁹ He died in April 1812 and was interred in the Black section of Copps Hill Burying Ground.¹⁰ Unlike Greenough’s section of the property, Harris’ stayed in his family for over thirty years. It was inherited by his son Samuel in late 1821 and purchased by Riggins the following year.¹¹ Now that he owned the entire Harris-Greenough house, Riggins transformed it into tenements for working-class African Americans.¹² After Riggins’s death in 1839, the building was purchased by Matthias Ellis, a North End politician who was buying up rental properties at the time.¹³

1. Eben Prout, grantor, to William Harris and Violet Greenough, grantees, Apr. 7, 1790, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 170, page 147.[↵](#)

2. The division of the house was detailed in a document Greenough that filed with Suffolk County on Oct. 15, 1802. Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 203, page 246.[↵](#)

3. J.G. Hales' 1814 "Map of Boston"—completed when the Harris-Greenough house was still standing—shows the structure set back from Robinson's Alley.

A short history of the North End printed in 1898 recalled farm animals owned by the residents of Robinson's Alley. "Around Copp's Hill," *The Sunday Herald (Boston)*, Jan. 30, 1898. [↵](#)

4. Greenough's marriage to Titus was mentioned in one of her obituaries. "Deaths," *Columbian Centinel (Boston)*, Jan. 7, 1804.

Her approximate birth year was specified in another obituary. "Died," *Democrat (Boston)*, Jan. 11, 1804. [↵](#)

5. Dean Willis, grantor, to Job Riggins, grantee, Jan. 20, 1817, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 253, page 198.[↵](#)

6. "Deaths," *Saturday Morning Transcript (Boston)*, Dec. 28, 1839.[↵](#)

7. Peter Mair, grantor, to Job Riggins, Aug. 27, 1819, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 263, page 207; George Low, grantor, to Job Riggins, grantee, Apr. 18, 1822, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 276, page 148.[↵](#)

8. Mary Harris' name was specified in the aforementioned document that Violet Greenough presented to Suffolk County authorities in October 1802. Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 203, page 246. [↵](#)

9. Harris' approximate age was listed in his death record. Entry for William Harris, Apr. 1812, Deaths Registered in the City of Boston (Listed Alphabetically) from 1801 to 1848 Inclusive. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

10. Entry for William Harris, Apr. 1812, Deaths Registered in the City of Boston (Listed Alphabetically) from 1801 to 1848 Inclusive. Accessed through Ancestry.com.[↵](#)

11. George Low, grantor, to Job Riggins, grantee, Apr. 18, 1822, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 276, page 148. Low had purchased the property from Samuel Harris three months earlier.[↵](#)

12. This use of the house is apparent in U.S. Census records and Boston city directories.[↵](#)

13. Joseph Young, grantor, to Matthias Ellis, grantee, Jul. 17, 1840, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 457, page 200. As mentioned in the deed, Young had been left the property in Riggins' will. [↵](#)

Mills House

Home of Yaro Waters

Approximate modern address: 6 Charter Street

Historic street name: Charter Street

The home of William Mills, a white house carpenter, once stood on this site. Mills and his family lived alongside a rotating cast of poor and working-class boarders during the late eighteenth century. In 1784, he rented rooms to white paupers Joseph Candish and Joseph Coburn, as well as a Black sawyer named Yaro Waters.¹

Like many Black Bostonians, little is known about Waters' background. His first name, however, provides a clue about Waters' or his family's place of origin. Yaro, meaning *son*, is a common name among the Hausa and Fulani peoples of West Africa.² Waters disappeared from Boston town records after 1785, suggesting that he either passed away or moved to another community.

1. "Taking Book Ward No. 2, 1784," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1784*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

2. For more on the name Yaro (or Yarrow, as it was often spelled in North America), see: James H. Johnston, "Rethinking Yarrow Mamout," *The Muslim World* 110, no. 3 (July 2020): 376-377.[↵](#)

High-End Rental Property and Paul Revere's Charter Street House, 1799-1818

Home of Mary

Approximate modern address: 16 Charter Street

Historic street name: Charter Street

This was the site of a high-end rental property in the late eighteenth century. In 1784, it was home to a woman named Mary, one of the last known enslaved people in Boston. Mary's enslaver, William Vernon, briefly rented the three-story house that stood on this property before eventually settling in West Boston.¹ Vernon was a wealthy merchant who had once owned a plantation in Essequibo, a Dutch colony that was located in present-day Guyana and Suriname.² Mary's origins are unclear, but she was still enslaved as of 1789 when Vernon freed her in his will.³ Her enslavement at this late date—six years after the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts declared slavery unconstitutional—exemplified the drawn-out nature of abolition in the Commonwealth and the fact that the state had no real means to enforce the court's decision.

Vernon's home was purchased by Paul Revere in 1799. It was more modern and in many respects a more genteel home than the one he lived in during the Revolution. The home no longer stands, but it was approximately at the site where the Eliot School stands today.

The people featured in this map were Revere's neighbors. We don't know how many of these neighbors he knew, but their stories are valuable in their own right as well as giving us insights into this neighborhood.

1. "Taking Book Ward No. 2, 1784," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1793*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

[2. *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Transactions, 1916-1917* \(Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1918\), 294, n. 2.↵](#)

3. Will of William Vernon, 1789, case no. 19344, Suffolk County Probate Files. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org. [↵](#)

Jackson Rental Property

Home of Jack Phillips, George Polley, and Adam Rowe
Approximate modern address: 390 Commercial Street
Historic street name: Ship Street

On this spot stood a house owned by Boston landlord Joseph Jackson. In the 1780s, it was home to a group of working-class men who were living on the property without Jackson's knowledge or permission. Most of these individuals were African American and at least two of them were involved in the *Tyrannicide* Affair, one of the first interstate disputes over slavery in American history.

Jackson learned of the squatters in his North End house in 1783. Over the next few years, he filed a series of lawsuits trying to evict them from the property or at least collect back rent.¹ Among the squatters were Jack Phillips and George Polley, two formerly enslaved men from South Carolina. In May 1779, a British privateer (basically, a government-licensed pirate ship) raided several Low Country plantations and abducted at least thirty-four enslaved people, including Phillips and Polley. The British raiders were then captured by the Massachusetts warship *Tyrannicide*, which brought the enslaved captives to Boston.² Eager to maintain good relations with South Carolina, the Massachusetts government quickly tracked down the captives' enslavers and sent most of them back south. Phillips and Polleys' enslavers, however, were unable to coordinate their return at the time, and it was not until 1783 that they tried to collect them. By this point, Massachusetts was in the process of abolishing slavery and authorities refused to help locate or detain Phillips and Polley.³ The men were essentially freed by the Commonwealth's inaction, much to the chagrin of South Carolina's governor, who went so far as to claim that Massachusetts had threatened the very stability of the Union.⁴

Shortly after Phillips and Polley were effectively emancipated, they—along with a handful of other people squatting in Jackson's rental property—were brought to trial. Ironically, one of their fellow defendants was a Black sailor named Adam Rowe who joined the crew of the *Tyrannicide* shortly after it brought the South Carolina captives to Boston.⁵ In the end, the men were all evicted and Polley, Phillips, and Rowe moved to the free Black neighborhood on the north slope of Beacon Hill. Phillips died there in April 1801 at around thirty-seven years old.⁶ Rowe and Polley, meanwhile, disappeared from the historical record in 1793 and 1801, respectively.⁷

1. Jackson's first lawsuit was filed in the Suffolk County Court of Common Pleas in September 1783. At the time, the squatters living on his property were Phillips, a Black laborer named Adam Rowe, and a white laborer named Uriah Moore (or Morse). *Jackson v. Moore, et al.*, Suffolk County Court of Common Pleas, Sept. 17, 1783.

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court finally ruled in Jackson's favor in 1786. By this point, the squatters were Moore, Polley, and Black musician named James Nichols. *Jackson v. Moore, et al.*, Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, Apr. 7, 1786. [↵](#)

2. Emily Blanck, *Tyrannicide: Forging an American Law of Slavery in Revolutionary South Carolina and Massachusetts* (University of Georgia Press, 2014), 88-89. [↵](#)

3. Phillips and Polley, along with several other people claimed by their enslavers, were briefly arrested, but the state supreme court ruled that their arrests were unlawful and ordered their quick release. Blanck, *Tyrannicide*, 134-135.[↵]

4. Blanck, *Tyrannicide*, 137.[↵]

5. Secretary of the Commonwealth, ed., *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1905), 615.[↵]

6. Cynthia Staples, “From the Historian,” *Trinity Church Boston*, February 26, 2025, <https://trinitychurchboston.org/from-the-historian-like-a-beautiful-quilt/>.[↵]

7. These were the last years that they appeared in Boston tax rolls.[↵]

Battery Wharf

Modern address: Battery Wharf

Historic street name: Battery Wharf

An enslaved sailor named Neth freed himself near this spot in 1801. Neth was from the Danish colony of St. Croix and served aboard the brig *Lindemann*. Shortly after the vessel docked at Battery Wharf in April 1801, Neth jumped ship and disappeared into the North End. An advertisement placed by the captain of the *Lindemann* described Neth as a “good looking” man in his early twenties who was fluent in both Danish and English. The captain worried that Neth’s English fluency would make it easy for him to blend into Boston’s free Black population. Anyone able to “detect” the runaway sailor and report his whereabouts to either the captain or his American business partners, the firm of Jeffrey & Russell, were offered \$20.¹ It is unknown if Neth was ever recaptured.

1. “Ran Away,” *Boston Gazette*, April 23, 1801. [↵]

Whitman Rental Property

Home of Isaac Charles and Nancy Sylvia Charles

Approximate modern address: 19 Greenough Lane

Historic street name: Located off Lynn Street

Near this spot stood a rental property owned by the Whitman family. For a brief period of time in the early nineteenth century, it was rented by a Black couple named Isaac Charles and Nancy Sylvia Charles. Isaac was first recorded in Boston in 1807 when he was around twenty-seven years old.¹ He moved into the property on Lynn Street three years later.² Isaac's occupation is unknown, but he probably worked on the nearby docks. It is unclear how long he lived on Lynn Street, as he briefly disappeared from the historical record after 1810. When he reappeared six years later, Isaac was on trial in Boston Municipal Court.

In February 1817, Isaac was convicted of receiving stolen goods and sentenced to twelve months hard labor.³ This was the standard punishment for property crime at the time, and he spent the next year making shoes and nails in Charlestown State Prison. These items were sold by the institution, which used their proceeds to help cover its operating costs. Needless to say, Isaac did not receive any type of payment for his work.⁴ His experience draws attention to the fact that slavery did not completely disappear from Massachusetts in the 1780s. Traces of the institution lived on in the Commonwealth's penal system.⁵

1. Charles married a woman named Nancy Sylvia in May 1807. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 241.[↵](#)

2. "Taking Book Ward 1, 1810," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1810 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

3. "Boston Municipal Court, Feb. term, 1817," *The Repertory (Boston)*, Feb. 13, 1817.[↵](#)

4. Adam J. Hirsch, "From Pillory to Penitentiary: The Rise of Criminal Incarceration in Early Massachusetts," *Michigan Law Review* 80 (1982): 1191-1239.[↵](#)

5. It is worth noting, however, that sentences of hard labor were not strictly dependent on race. For example, a white man named Joshua Trevis was sentenced to hard labor at the same session of Boston Municipal Court as Charles. "Boston Municipal Court, Feb. term, 1817," *The Repertory (Boston)*, Feb. 13, 1817. [↵](#)

Swift Property

Home of George Robinson
Approximate modern address: 26 Charter Street
Historic street name: Charter Street

George Robinson lived and worked on this site from 1797 – 1801.¹ A journeyman baker, he was employed by—and boarded with—Henry Swift, one of several established bakers in the North End. ²

Very little is known about Robinson's life. He began his career in the Salem Street bakery of Edward Edes.³ As in other craft traditions, bakers spent several years as unpaid apprentices learning the ins and outs of their trade. After sufficient training, they were elevated to the status of journeymen, which meant that they could work for wages.⁴ Robinson completed his apprenticeship around 1792.⁵ He remained with Edes for several more years before taking a job with Swift.⁶

Like many businesses in the North End, Swift's operation was geared toward the sea. His bakery specialized in making "ship's bread," a type of dense, hard biscuit that was resistant to spoilage and a staple food for sailors.⁷ Baking was labor-intensive work, and Robinson's days consisted of long hours spent handling dough in a hot and smoky bakehouse. Tax records show that he was one of two journeymen employed by Swift. The other was a white man named Daniel Kilborn, with whom Robinson shared a room in Swift's three-story mansion.⁸ The two men lived and worked together on the Swift property until around 1801. After this point, Kilborn took a job with another North End baker, and Robinson disappeared from the historical record.⁹

1. Ward 2 taking books described Robinson as working with Swift during this span of time. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)
2. For more on Henry Swift and the location of his bakery, please see: *American Series of Popular Biographies: Massachusetts Edition* (Boston: Graves & Steinbarger, 1901), 564.[↵](#)
3. Early tax records described Robinson as simply a Black man “with” Edward Edes. “List of Ward No. 3, 1790,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)
4. Sueanna Smith, “Reimagining Prince Hall: Race, Freemasonry, and Material Culture in Boston, 1775-1870,” PhD diss., (University of South Carolina, 2021), 66-67.[↵](#)
5. This was the first year that tax records described Robinson as a journeyman. “List of Ward No. 3, 1792,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1792 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)
6. It is possible to trace Robinson’s career arc through analyzing the Ward 2 and Ward 3 taking books over time. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)
7. The 1808 inventory of his estate listed hundreds of barrels of ship’s bread in Swift’s bakehouse. Probate Records of Henry Swift, Apr. 18, 1808, no. 23136, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org. [↵](#)
8. Property described in the 1798 Direct Tax. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States’ Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 157. [↵](#)
9. 1802 tax records for Ward 2 show that Robinson and Kilborn no longer worked for Swift. “Wards No. 2 & 3 Taking Book,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1802 Taking Books, Wards 1-6 (and part of 10), 7-10 and 11-12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)

Cartwright Tenement Building

Home of William Gwinn and Betsey Davenport Gwinn

Approximate modern address: Between 37 Tileston Street and the Paul Revere Mall

Historic street name: Robinson's Alley

Near this spot stood a rental property owned by Elizabeth Cartwright. Unlike most of her neighbors, Elizabeth was a member of Boston’s white middle class. The house on this site was originally owned by her father, Captain Thomas Cartwright.¹ After inheriting the property in 1790, Elizabeth converted the structure into a tenement building. Early on, its rooms were mostly rented by working-class whites.² After 1803, however, Elizabeth’s boarders were primarily Black men, a shift that reflected the surrounding area’s transformation into an African American neighborhood.³

Beginning in 1810, the property was home to William Gwinn and Betsy Davenport Gwinn (or, Guinn), who were some of the first Black Americans involved in the “Back-to-Africa” movement.⁴ Originally from New York and Virginia, respectively, William and Betsy were living in Boston by the time they married in August 1798.⁵ Shortly after moving to Robinson’s Alley, they

became acquainted with Paul Cuffe, an Afro-Indigenous businessman and philanthropist who was at the time one of the leading American proponents of Black emigration to West Africa.

In the 1780s, British abolitionists had established the colony of Sierra Leone as a refuge for formerly enslaved people looking to escape discrimination and poverty in Great Britain and Canada. After visiting the colony in 1811, Cuffe promoted it as a place where Black Americans could likewise find the equality and economic opportunity that they were denied in the United States. William and Betsy Gwinn were among the first Americans to sign on to Cuffe's emigration project. They sailed for Sierra Leone in December 1815 and arrived in the British colony two months later. Unfortunately, little is known about their lives in West Africa.⁶ Back in the United States, Cuffe's efforts inspired the creation of the American Colonization Society (ACS), which set up the colony of Liberia as an American version of Sierra Leone. Cuffe did not live to see the founding of Liberia, but the project failed to win much support among Black Americans, as the leadership of the ACS was dominated by enslavers who were more concerned with removing free Black people from the United States than they were with providing them with better lives overseas.⁷

As for the tenement that stood on this lot, it remained in Elizabeth Cartwright's possession until her death in 1851, by which point Robinson's Alley—along with the rest of the North End—was becoming a predominantly Irish section of the city.⁸

1. "Taking Book Ward No. 2, 1810," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1793*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820; United States Census Bureau, 1810 federal census, Boston, Suffolk County, Mass.[↵](#)

2. George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 235-236; *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 471.[↵](#)

3. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Box: Writing the Race* (Penguin Press, 2024), 48-50; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 186.[↵](#)

4. Nicholas Guyatt, "The American Colonization Society: 200 Years of the 'Colonizing Trick,'" *Black Perspectives*, Dec. 22, 2026, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-american-colonization-society-200-years-of-the-colonizing-trick/>.[↵](#)

Brown Property

Home of John Brown, Delia Willis Brown, Amey Brown, and Sukey Brown

Approximate modern address: Between 24 Unity Street and the Paul Revere Mall
Historic street name: Robinson's Alley

John Brown was the first Black property owner in Robinson's Alley. He paid £21 for a piece of land around this spot in June 1787.¹ The money was likely made through John's work as a soap boiler. This labor-intensive trade—which involved boiling a mixture of lye and animal fat to produce soap—was common among Black men during this period. Within three years, John and his family had moved into a new two-story house on the lot.² Unfortunately, he did not get to enjoy life in Robinson's Alley for very long. John died suddenly in 1791, leaving behind his wife Delia Willis Brown and two young daughters Amey and Sukey.³

Delia struggled to make ends meet in the years following John's death. She took in boarders but still found it difficult to pay off debts and provide for her daughters. Things became even worse for the Browns after Delia fell ill and had to be confined to her bed. The family's plight quickly attracted the attention of Primus Hall, one of the leading figures in Boston's Black community. Born into slavery, Hall was emancipated before the American Revolution, served in the war, and went on to become a leading voice for the rights of Black Bostonians. He helped Delia settle John's estate and eventually became the legal guardian of her daughters.⁴

Hall was an especially passionate advocate for African American education. Boston's public schools were integrated, but Hall worried that the racism faced by Black students made it all but impossible for them to learn. In 1798, he founded a private school for African American children in his Beacon Hill home.⁵ Amey and Sukey Brown were apparently two of the first students to attend this institution. A receipt from 1802 shows that Delia paid \$10 for the "schooling of [her] children [for] 18 months."⁶

Amey Brown took over the family home on Robinson's Alley around 1811, by which time she was married to a laborer named John Jackson.⁷ The couple lived in the Brown house until 1816.⁸ Five years later, they sold the vacant property to Henry J. Oliver, a white businessman and politician who was buying up homes in the area and converting them into tenements.⁹

1. Sarah Larrabee, grantor, to John Brown, grantee, Jun. 30, 1787, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 160, page 196.[↵](#)

2. First listed in the April 1790 taking list. "List of Ward No. 2, 1790," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.

The house was described in the 1798 Direct Tax. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States' Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 140.[↵](#)

3. The couple were married eight years earlier by Reverend Samuel Stillman of Boston's First Baptist Church. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 71.

Their daughters were named in John's probate file. Probate Records of John Brown, Aug. 8, 1791, no. 19771, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org. [↵](#)

4. Probate Records of John Brown, Aug. 8, 1791, no. 19771, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org. [↵](#)

5. Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 76.[↵](#)

6. The document is included in John Brown's probate file. Probate Records of John Brown, Aug. 8, 1791, no. 19771, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org.[↵](#)

7. "Taking Book, Ward 1, 1811," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1811 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.

The couple were married in 1808. Interestingly, Amy's marriage record shows that she used her mother's maiden name—Willis—rather than Brown prior to her marriage. *A Volume of Records*

Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages From 1752 to 1809 (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 256. [↵](#)

8. This was the last year that the couple was listed at the property. “Taking Book Ward No. 1, 1816,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1816 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 3 to 1816 Taking Books Wards 10-12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

9. John Jackson and Amy Jackson, grantors, to Henry J. Oliver, grantee, Sept. 3, 1821, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 273, page 30. [↵](#)

Howard Property

Home of Violet Howard

Approximate modern address: Southwest corner of Unity Street and the Paul Revere Mall
Historic street name: Robinson's Alley

Near this site stood the home of Violet Howard. Little is known of her early life apart from an approximate birth year of 1740.¹ By the time of her marriage in March 1778, she was a free woman living in Boston.² Howard and her husband—a fellow free African American named Bacchus Maxwell—spent the next ten-plus years moving around the southern wards of the city. Like many Black men during this period, Bacchus worked as a laborer and a sailor.³ He died sometime between 1792 – 1797.⁴

In July 1797, Howard purchased this lot on the corner of Unity Street and Robinson's Alley.⁵ For reasons that are unclear, it was another thirteen years before she put a house on the property.⁶ This delay may have been due to financial difficulties. Indeed, as soon as her new home was finally built, Howard was forced to sell it to pay off some debt.⁷ Luckily, its new owner—a white woodworker named John Howe—allowed her to continue living onsite. Although Howard settled in the North End, she also had ties to the growing Black neighborhood in West Boston. For example, among her possessions was a bible she described as a “present” from the African Baptist Church.⁸ This congregation met at the African Meeting House on Joy Street and was founded in 1805 by Black Bostonians frustrated at the racism they encountered in the city's majority-white churches.⁹

Howard died in December 1815 at approximately seventy-five years of age.¹⁰ Shortly before her death, she commissioned an inventory of her personal property to help with the settlement of her estate. This document provides a glimpse into what life was like in her Robinson's Alley home. Most items listed were utilitarian, like fire tongs and bedding, but Howard also owned luxury goods that likely provided her with a sense of status and comfort. These included a roundabout chair (a type of chair built specifically to fit into a corner), looking glasses, and “seven pictures, one framed and glassed.”¹¹

Howard was laid to rest in the Black section of Copps Hill Burying Ground and eulogized as a “respectable colored woman” in the Boston press.¹² Her house was subsequently converted into a rental property. Like the others that once stood along Robinson's Alley, its tenants were primarily African American men, many of whom likely worked on the nearby waterfront.¹³

1. “Died,” *The Yankee (Boston)*, Dec. 8, 1815. [↵](#)

2. She and her husband were both described as “free negroes” in their marriage record. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 440. [↵](#)
 3. It is possible to trace Bacchus Maxwell’s various jobs, as well as the places that he and Violet called home, through analyzing the tax lists for Wards 10, 11, and 12 from 1786 – 1792. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)
 4. Maxwell was last listed in Boston tax records in 1792 and Howard was described as a widow in the deed for her property in Robinson’s Alley. [↵](#)
 5. David Shillaber, grantor, to Violet Howard, grantee, Jul. 15, 1797, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 186, page 169. [↵](#)
 6. Detailed taking book records between 1797 – 1810 show that show that there was no dwelling on the lot during that time. The Brown family home directly to the west was instead listed at the head of Robinson’s Alley. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)
 7. Howard first mortgaged her real estate in 1810, then outright sold it the following year. Violet Howard, grantor, to Noah Lincoln, Mar. 6, 1810, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 232, page 59; Violet Howard, grantor, to John Howe, grantee, Apr. 5, 1811, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 237, page 23. [↵](#)
 8. Quoted in a deed where she left her personal property to a man named William Robeson. Violet Howard, grantor, to William Robeson, grantee, May 8, 1815, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 249, page 4. [↵](#)
 9. For more on this topic, please see this map’s entry on Boston’s First Baptist Church. [↵](#)
 10. “Died,” *The Yankee (Boston)*, Dec. 8, 1815. [↵](#)
 11. Violet Howard, grantor, to William Robeson, grantee, May 8, 1815, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 249, page 4. [↵](#)
 12. Entry for Violet Howard, Dec. 4, 1815, Deaths Registered in the City of Boston (Listed Alphabetically) from 1801 to 1848 Inclusive. Accessed through Ancestry.com.
- “Died,” *The Yankee (Boston)*, Dec. 8, 1815. [↵](#)
13. It is possible to trace the tenants through analyzing the Ward 1 taking lists from 1816 – 1821. Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

Edes House and Bakery

Home of Peter Fisk and George Robinson
Approximate modern address: 39 N. Bennet Street
Historic street name: Corner of N. Bennet and Salem Streets

The home and bakery of Edward Edes, a white baker, once stood on this site. In 1789, the property was also home to a free Black man named Peter Fisk.¹ Fisk likely worked in Edes' bakehouse, which mainly produced "hard bread," a durable type of biscuit that was a mainstay of sailors' diets in the eighteenth-century.² Indeed, Edes' operation was one of several in the area that catered to the North End's maritime industry.

Fisk was the first of at least two Black bakers to work for Edes. By 1790, Fisk had apparently left and been replaced by a man named George Robinson.³ Robinson was employed by Edes for several years before leaving to work for his competitor, Henry Swift.⁴

1. "Taking Book Ward No. 3, 1789," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1789*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

2. Probate file of Edward Edes, 1803, case no. 21977, Suffolk County Probate Records.[↵](#)

3. "Taking Book Ward No. 3, 1790," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

4. "Taking Book Ward No. 2, 1797," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1797*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

Howard Rental Property

Home of Prince Chew

Approximate modern address: West end of 4 Snelling Place
Historic street name: Hull Street

Near this spot stood a small house rented by Prince Chew and his family. The dwelling—a single story, 500-square-foot structure—was owned by Reverend Simeon Howard.¹ Howard was both the pastor of Boston's Old West Church and a major landlord in the North End. Most of his tenants worked on the nearby waterfront, and Prince was likely no exception.²

Originally from Newton, Massachusetts, the Chews began renting from Howard around 1797.³ Prince, his wife (whose name is unknown), and their five children were among the hundreds of African Americans who moved to the Boston during this period. The city offered opportunities that were not necessarily available in smaller towns like Newton, like plentiful jobs. Prince was a laborer, for example, and likely found steady work on the bustling wharves of the North End. Unfortunately, he passed away within a few years of settling in Boston. In May 1802, a city tax assessor noted that Prince was "sick and poor."⁴ He died the following year at age thirty-eight and his family soon disappeared from the historical record.⁵

Unlike most of the African Americans who came to Boston during this period, there is still a trace of Prince in the modern cityscape. His tombstone stands in Copps Hill Burying Ground, one of only a handful of extant markers belonging to Black Bostonians.⁶ Given the Chews' poverty and the expensive nature of gravestones, they likely received outside help in erecting the monument, perhaps from one of Prince's employers or members of Boston's larger Black community.

1. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States' Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 130.[↵](#)
2. For example, the tenants who rented his other properties as of 1798 were mostly sailors and ship's captains. "List of Ward No. 1," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1798 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)
3. This was the first year they appeared on Hull Street in the Boston tax records. Prior to this time, they were listed as taxpayers in Newton. "List of Ward No. 1," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1797 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821; "Copy of Mr. Bartlett's List for 1796," Newton Tax Lists, Massachusetts Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)
4. "List of Ward No. 1," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1802 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)
5. Entry for Prince Chew, October 21, 1803, Deaths in Boston, from 1800-1810, vol. 32. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)
6. For more on this topic, please see: Dart Adams, "The Forgotten Legacies of Boston's Historic Black Graveyard," *Boston Magazine*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2022/05/03/black-graveyard-legacy/>.[↵](#)

Hall Rental Property

Home of Thomas Wells and Joanna Brown Wells

Approximate modern address: 24 Hull Street

Historic street name: Hull Street

A small building stood on this site during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Prior to his death in 1801, it belonged to Alexander Baker, a caulker in the shipbuilding trade and brother-in-law of Paul Revere.¹ Indeed, Baker's house was located next to the structure and there is some indication that it may have originally been used as his woodshed.² By 1804, the building had been purchased by the white Hall family and transformed into an apartment.³ Thomas Wells and Joanna Brown moved in five years later.⁴

Wells was born around 1773 and originally from the West Indies.⁵ He was living in Boston by December 1807 when he and Joanna Brown announced their intention to marry. The pair were wed by Reverend John Eliot of the New North Church (also known as the Fifth Church of Boston) on March 14, 1808.⁶ Nothing is known about Brown prior to this date.

Wells and Brown moved into the small house on Hull Street within a year of their marriage. Brown likely spent a good deal of time alone at the property given her husband's occupation. Like many Black men during this era, Thomas was a mariner.⁷ Life at sea offered African Americans professional opportunities that were not typically available on land. For example, unlike most occupations at the time, ranks and salaries aboard merchant ships were determined more by experience than by race (at least up to a point). Black sailors who had spent years at sea routinely outranked less-experienced white crewmates.⁸

Although maritime work certainly had its appeal, it was also highly susceptible to global events. From 1812 – 1815, for example, war between Great Britain and the United States devastated American shipping. For almost two and a half years, the Royal Navy blockaded the entire east coast, effectively shutting down ports like Boston. It was perhaps because of these events that Thomas checked himself into the Boston Almshouse in December 1814. It was there that he died five months later.⁹ Unfortunately, it is unknown what became of Brown after her husband's death.

1. Esther Forbes, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 488.[↵](#)
2. This is based on an analysis of the Ward 1 taking books from 1786-1802, coupled with a close examination of Baker's probate records, and the 1798 Direct Tax. [↵](#)
3. "Taking Book Ward No. 1, 1804," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1804 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)
4. Thomas Wells was first listed at the address in 1809. "Taking Book for Ward 1, 1809," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1809 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)
5. Admission record for Thomas Wells, Dec. 7, 1814, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society.[↵](#)
6. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 280.[↵](#)
7. "Taking Book Ward 1, 1810," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1810 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵](#)
8. For a book-length study of this topic, please see: W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: Black Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).[↵](#)
9. Admission record for Thomas Wells, Dec. 7, 1814, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society.[↵](#)

Freeman-Hambury House

Home of Thomas Freeman and Sarah Fitch Freeman
Approximate modern address: 63 Charter Street
Historic street name: Charter Street

A two-story brick house once stood on this site. Built in 1728, it was purchased by a white candlemaker and soap boiler named Joseph Hambury in the early 1790s. Hambury subdivided the building, moved into the rear section with his family, and listed the front half for sale. It was purchased by a Black sailor named Thomas Freeman in August 1793.¹

Seafaring work offered Black men career opportunities that they were routinely denied in other fields. Given its high-risk and dangerous nature, experience and skill were valued over skin color,

and it was not uncommon for Black sailors to outrank their white crewmates.² Indeed, it may have been a high-ranking position on a sailing vessel that afforded Thomas the money needed to buy a home.

Apart from Thomas' profession, next to nothing is known about his background. He was living in Boston by September 1790 when he decided to write his will and left all his property to a "good friend" named Sarah Fitch. By 1797, Sarah had become Thomas' wife. She took ownership of the Charter Street house after he died in June of that year.³

Like her late husband, little is known about Sarah. She may have originally been from New York, but was living in Boston by 1790, at which point she was around thirty-eight years old. Following Thomas' death, she turned their property into a boardinghouse, where she provided lodgers with room, board, and laundry service. Most, if not all, of her tenants were African Americans, like Eunice Essence, a "spinster" from Cape Cod whom she sued for unpaid board in 1805, and Amey Willis Brown, a Boston youth who was put in Freeman's custody after the death of her father.⁴

Sarah also worked for the neighboring Hambury family, likely doing the same types of domestic tasks she did in her boarding house. In 1799, she successfully sued Joseph Hambury for \$500 in unpaid wages, a substantial sum at the time.⁵

Even with multiple sources of income, Sarah struggled with debt throughout her life and was jailed at least twice for failing to pay various bills. Sarah's status as a homeowner helped her avoid further jail time as she was occasionally able to mortgage the property to creditors and pay off her debts over time. At the time of her death in 1816, for example, it was mortgaged to Reverend Asa Eaton of the Old North Church. Sarah's will left the house to a relative named Elizabeth Fitch, who paid off the mortgage and continued taking in boarders.⁶ After Elizabeth died in the late 1830s, the house was acquired by Henry J. Oliver, a white landlord and politician who was buying up North End rental properties at the time.⁷

1. Joseph Hambury, grantor, to Thomas Freeman, grantee, August 1793, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Register of Deeds, vol. 178, pp. 168.↵

2. For a book-length study of this topic, see: W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Harvard University Press, 1997).↵

3. Probate file of Thomas Freeman, 1797, case no. 20724, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate Records. ↵

4. Sarah Freeman v. Eunice Essence, Suffolk County Court of Common Pleas, May 8, 1805; Sarah Freeman v. Amey Willis Brown, et al., Suffolk County Court of Common Pleas, May 28, 1807.↵

5. Sarah Freeman v. Joseph Hambury, Suffolk County Court of Common Pleas, May 13, 1799;↵

6. Probate file of Sarah Freeman, 1816, case no. 24951, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate Records.↵

7. Joseph A. Whitney, grantor, to Henry J. Oliver, grantee, October 1837, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 424, pp. 248.↩

Copps Hill Burying Ground

Modern address: 45 Hull Street
Historic street name: Hull Street

Hundreds of Black Bostonians—free and enslaved—were buried here during the colonial and early national eras. Copps Hill was one of the only graveyards in early America that allowed Black and white burials. That being said, it was segregated, and Black interments were mostly limited to a stretch of land along Snow Hill Street. Today, only a handful of these graves are marked, including those of Prince Hall, the founder of Black freemasonry, his first wife Sarah Ritchey, and Abel Barbadoes, a master mason who worked on the African Meeting House in the West End.¹

Given the expensive nature of gravestones, it's likely that many graves in the Black section of Copps Hill were never marked. Others were probably marked by monuments that have long since deteriorated. As noted by historian Dart Adams, the disappearance of these markers speaks to the decline of the North End's Black population. As African Americans left the area—whether for neighborhoods like West Boston or new communities altogether—there was no one left to care for the graves of their loved ones.²

1. Dart Adams, “The Forgotten Legacies of Boston’s Historic Black Graveyard,” *Boston Magazine*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2022/05/03/black-graveyard-legacy/> (accessed July 13, 2024).

For more on Prince Hall and Sarah Ritchey (also spelled Ritchie), please see: Thaddeus Russell, “Prince Hall,” in *African American Lives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 368-369.

For more on Abel Barbadoes, please see: “Building the African Meeting House,” *The West End Museum*, <https://thewestendmuseum.org/history/era/west-boston/building-the-african-meeting-house/> (accessed July 13, 2024).

Other marked burials included a laborer named Prince Chew, a free woman named Margaret Colley who died in 1761, and a woman named Mary Augustus who was enslaved by Robert Ball.↩

2. Adams, “The Forgotten Legacies of Boston’s Historic Black Graveyard.”↩

Goodwin Rental Property

Home of John Mountford
Approximate modern address: 540 Commercial Street
Historic street name: Lynn Street

This was once the site of a rental property owned by Benjamin Goodwin, a white landlord who also owned a nearby wharf, bakehouse, and blacksmith shop.¹ In 1810, the property was rented by a Black

sailor named John Mountford.² Apart from his occupation, which was common for Black men during this era, little is known about Mountford's life. His last name suggests that he may have been descended from someone who was enslaved by Boston's white Mountford family, who were known to be enslavers as of the mid-eighteenth century.³ John Mountford was apparently only Goodwin's tenant for about a year. He disappeared from the historical record after 1810.

1. Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of the Town of Boston, 1630-1822* (Marshall Jones Company, 1920) 76.[↵](#)

2. "Taking Book Ward No. 1, 1810," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1810*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

3. Probate file of Jonathan Mountfort, 1750, case no. 9654, Suffolk County Probate Records.[↵](#)

Charlestown Ferry House

Approximate modern address: Eliot K-8 Innovation Upper School parking lot
Historic street name: Prince Street

In 1797, the Black civil rights leader and prominent Mason Prince Hall delivered a speech decrying the "daily insults" that African Americans faced in the streets of Boston. According to Hall, white Bostonians, especially those in the lower classes, harassed and attacked their Black neighbors with impunity.¹ A crime committed near this spot in 1786 exemplified this situation to an extreme degree.

On the afternoon of May 8, an intoxicated Black man known only as Cyrus was observed walking around the North End, dressed only in a pair of socks and shoes. Cyrus was apparently homeless and, according to city authorities, had been dealing with mental illness and alcoholism for several years. Over the course of the evening, a crowd of jeering neighborhood boys began to follow Cyrus, eventually pursuing him to the ferry house that stood near this spot and dousing him with cold water. Cyrus lost consciousness soon afterwards and died of exposure after being "chilled by the night-air." Even though the details of the case were known to Boston authorities, a grand jury declined to charge any of the boys involved and instead determined that Cyrus' death was accidental.²

1. Lewis Hayden, *Caste among Masons* (Boston: Edward S. Coombs & Company, 1866), 66.[↵](#)

2. "Massachusetts," *The American Recorder and Charlestown (MA) Advertiser*, May 12, 1786.[↵](#)

Atkins Estate

Home of Cloe

Approximate modern address: DeFilippo Playground, 135 Prince Street
Historic street name: Prince Street

Near this spot stood the mansion of Captain Silas Atkins. The property was also home to an enslaved woman known only as Cloe - at least, until she ran away and freed herself in June 1776.

Everything known about Cloe comes from a runaway advertisement placed by Atkins. These types of ads provided the public with physical descriptions and biographical information about enslaved people who escaped their captors. Those who helped enslavers like Atkins recover their human "property" were offered cash rewards. For example, anyone who returned Cloe to Atkins or provided information about her whereabouts would receive four dollars.¹

According to her enslaver, Cloe was born around 1739. Her place of birth is unknown, but Atkins implied that she may not have been a native English speaker. Physically, Cloe was described as "thick [and] well-set" with a "palish Black" complexion and a "flat face."² She was likely enslaved by Atkins as early as 1771, when a colony-wide tax listed one "servant for life" among his possessions.³ Atkins was a wealthy mariner who owned several ships and imported goods from places like Newfoundland and the West Indies.⁴ Like other wealthy Bostonians, he took his family and fled to a country estate during the 1775 - 1776 Siege of Boston.⁵ Cloe apparently accompanied the Atkinses, attending to their needs during their relatively comfortable exile.

Chloe and her enslavers returned to Boston after the siege was lifted in March 1776. She likely spent the next few months planning her escape. Cloe was first reported missing on June 20th, with Atkins surmising that she had gone back to the countryside.⁶ Perhaps Cloe had made valuable connections in her months away from Boston, connections that helped her slip away from her enslavers. Indeed, it does not appear that she was ever caught. Atkins continued placing runaway ads for several more months, but apparently gave up by the end of September.⁷ Furthermore, upon his death two years later, Cloe was not listed in the inventory of the old man's estate.⁸

Freedom-seekers like Cloe directly contributed toward the end of slavery in Massachusetts. Public support for the institution was already in decline by the time Cloe left Boston. The rhetoric of the American Revolution caused many white Massachusetts residents to question the legitimacy of slavery. A number of communities even went so far as to pass resolutions condemning the practice, pointing out that it was completely incompatible with revolutionary ideals like liberty and independence.⁹ Such sentiments were only strengthened by the passage of a new state constitution in the 1780s, and its declaration that "all men are born free and equal."¹⁰

It was in this political climate that a growing number of enslaved people decided to free themselves. Some sat down with their enslavers and negotiated the terms of their emancipation. Others simply absconded, hoping that public opinion would dissuade anyone from tracking them down. In either case, these individuals played a key role in bringing down slavery in Massachusetts - arguably, one on par with that of the state supreme court. Their actions made an already weakened institution seem completely untenable and further ensured that the 1783 ruling that declared slavery unconstitutional was not met with significant resistance.¹¹

1. "Ran away from the Subscriber," *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser (Boston)*, Jun. 20, 1776.[↩]

2. "Ran away from the Subscriber," *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser (Boston)*, Jun. 20, 1776.[↩]

3. Entry for Silas Atkins, Boston, Suffolk, County, Mass. 1771 Massachusetts Tax Inventory, <https://legacy.sites.fas.harvard.edu/~hsb41/masstax/masstax.cgi> (Accessed July 17, 2024)[↩]

4. Probate Records of Silas Atkins, 1778, no. 16787, Suffolk county, Massachusetts Probate File Papers. Accessed through AmericanAncestors.org.[↵](#)
5. John Adams Vinton, *The Giles Memorial* (Boston: Henry W. Dotton & Son, 1864), 134-135.[↵](#)
6. "Ran away from the Subscriber," *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser (Boston)*, Jun. 20, 1776.[↵](#)
7. "Ran away from the Subscriber," *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser (Boston)*, Jun. 20, 1776.[↵](#)
8. "Ran away from the Subscriber," *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser (Boston)*, Jun. 20, 1776.[↵](#)
9. For recent studies that examine this phenomenon, please see: Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Gloria McCahon Whiting, "Emancipation Without the Courts of Constitution: The Case of Revolutionary Massachusetts," *Slavery & Abolition* 41, no. 3 (2020): 458-478.[↵](#)
10. *The Constitution of the State of Massachusetts, Adopted 1780* (Boston: Russell & Gardener, 1820), 5.[↵](#)
11. Minardi, *Making Slavery History*; Whiting, "Emancipation Without the Courts of Constitution." [↵](#)

Peters Property

Home of John Peters

Approximate modern address: 130 Prince Street

Historic Street Name: Prince Street

This site was once home to John Peters. He lived in a modest, one-story house near this spot from around 1788 – 1799.¹ Today, Peters is mostly remembered as the husband of Phillis Wheatley, the first Black woman to publish a book of poetry. It was here in the North End that Peters rebuilt his life after Wheatley's sudden death.

Peters was born into slavery around 1746 in Middleton, Massachusetts. He spent his childhood on the farm of John and Naomi Wilkins, until they sold him away for repeatedly defying their authority. It is unknown to whom Peters was sold, or what his life was like with these new enslavers, but he was a free man by the time he turned up in Boston in 1776.²

In company with a white man named Josias Byles, Peters soon established himself as a successful shopkeeper.³ His business was in a relatively fashionable area of town and it was likely there that he met Phillis Wheatley. Born in West Africa, she was formerly enslaved by John Wheatley, a wealthy merchant, and his wife Susanna. The pair had taken an unusual interest in her education and Phillis had proven herself a talented poet. In 1773, the Wheatleys sent her to London with the hopes of securing a publishing deal. She was ultimately successful and her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was well-received in both Great Britain and North America. Phillis Wheatley was emancipated shortly after her return to Boston.⁴

Peters married Wheatley five years after she achieved international fame. In 1780, the couple suddenly left Boston and moved back to Peters' hometown of Middleton. Curiously, he had reconnected with his former enslavers and been deeded their farm after John Wilkins' death. Unfortunately, their time in the countryside was short. Surviving members of the Wilkins family challenged the validity of the deed and buried the couple beneath a flurry of lawsuits. Peters was an experienced litigator—suing customers for unpaid debts was a common part of eighteenth-century shop keeping—but he eventually lost his claim to the Wilkins property and was evicted in 1783.⁵

With their finances depleted and few other options, Peters and Wheatley returned to Boston. In contrast to their former lives, they moved into a crowded boarding house on the western edge of town.⁶ It was there that Peters began planning for the couple's future in the North End. In July 1784, he began renting shop space on Prince Street.⁷ His business was near the Charles River and the ferry that connected Boston to Charlestown. This area was full of shops that profited from trade with the surrounding countryside and Peters likely hoped to emulate their success.⁸ Unfortunately, he was hit with a new round of lawsuits after returning to Boston (he had apparently left town without settling debts to his landlord and business partner) and was in-and-out of prison for the rest of the year. Indeed, Peters was serving a short sentence when Wheatley died suddenly in December.⁹

Newly widowed and under a mountain of debt, Peters relocated to Prince Street by 1788.¹⁰ Curiously, his revived career as a shopkeeper did not last for very long. From 1788 – 1799, Peters described himself as a lawyer and a physician to Boston tax assessors.¹¹ This was an era when it was common for individuals to have multiple occupations and a time when you did not necessarily need a degree to practice law or medicine.¹² Peters was certainly experienced when it came to arguing before a judge, but his medical qualifications are more mysterious. At any rate, tax records show that Peters successfully recovered much of his social status in the North End—at least for a time.¹³ He fled Boston in 1799, apparently to avoid paying taxes.¹⁴ After a brief stay in Cambridge, Peters settled in Charlestown, where he died—heavily in debt—in March 1801.¹⁵

1. Analysis of Ward 1 taking books from 1788 – 1799, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.

The building was described in the 1798 Direct Tax. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States' Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 133.[↵]

2. Cornelia H. Dayton, “Lost Years Recovered: John Peters and Phillis Wheatley Peters in Middleton,” *The New England Quarterly* XCIV, no. 3 (Sept. 2021): 313-318.[↵]

3. Dayton, “Lost Years Recovered,” 320; William H. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984), 54.[↵]

4. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* 20-47.[↵]

5. Dayton, “Lost Years Recovered,” 345-349.[↵]

6. Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2023), 186.[↵]

7. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley*, 58-59.[↵]

8. Analysis of Ward 1 taking books and the 1798 Direct Tax.[↵]

9. Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley Peters*, 186-187. [↵](#)

10. This was the first year that he was recorded in the area in Boston tax documents. “Ward No. 1, List for 1788,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1788 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 11*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

11. Analysis of Ward 1 taking books from 1788 – 1799, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

12. Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley Peters*, 199-200. [↵](#)

13. Tax records show his property value increasing and his use of the title “gentleman.” Analysis of Ward 1 taking books from 1788 – 1799, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821; *Statistics of the United States’ Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston*, 133. [↵](#)

14. His property was later auctioned off for nonpayment of taxes. “Direct Tax,” *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 15, 1801. [↵](#)

15. Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley Peters*, 202. [↵](#)

First Baptist Church

Approximate modern address: 15 Stillman Street
Historic street name: Back Street

This was the original location of the Boston’s First Baptist Church (today the congregation is in the Back Bay).¹ First Baptist was a major center of African American religious life from the 1780s through the early 1800s. This was partly because of its location: most of the city’s Black population lived within a few blocks of the church. The congregation also owed its relatively high number of African American members to its pastor, Samuel Stillman.

Stillman was a generally popular minister known for his egalitarian rhetoric and advocacy for the less fortunate.² He was also one of the first clergymen in Boston to publicly condemn slavery, calling for “total emancipation” as early as 1779.³ However, despite Stillman’s concern for the downtrodden and opposition to slavery, he did not believe in racial equality. Seating in First Baptist was segregated and when Thomas Paul—a Black Baptist preacher from New Hampshire—visited his church, Stillman allegedly refused to let him speak to the congregation, telling him that they did not “mix colours” in Boston. These policies help explain why a group of Black parishioners decided to leave First Baptist and start their own church in 1805. For his part, Stillman was supportive of the move and became one of the most prominent white backers of the new African Baptist Church on Joy Street. ⁴

1. The location of the church was specified in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. IV: Transactions, 1899, 1900* (1904): 117. [↵](#)

2. Christine Levecq, *Black Cosmopolitans: Race, Religion, and Republicanism in an Age of Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 227-229. [↵](#)

3. Samuel Stillman, *A sermon preached before the Honorable Council, and the Honorable House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts-Bay* (Boston: T. & J. Fleet, 1779). [↵](#)

4. Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 199; John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 336-339; Levecq, *Black Cosmopolitans*, 229. [↵](#)

Baker Mansion

Home of Jack, Jolly, and Phebe
Approximate modern address: 82 Salem Street
Historic street name: Back Street

Three enslaved people lived on this property in the late eighteenth century: a man named Jack, a woman named, Jolly, and a child named Phebe. Their enslaver—sugar boiler John Baker—died in 1780 and instructed his heirs to free Phebe when she turned twenty-one. No such considerations were given to Jack or Jolly, who may have been Phebe’s parents.¹

Originally from Germany, Baker was living in Boston by 1734 when he married Mary Sigourney.² Within a year, he and his brother-in-law Andrew had established a sugar business, importing slave-produced molasses from the West Indies and rendering it into loaves of brown sugar.³ Slave labor not only produced the raw material that kept Baker and Sigourneys’ business afloat, it was also at the center of their boiling operation. Following Andrew’s death in 1761, for example, he left his brother-in-law an enslaved man named Prince.⁴ Baker, in turn, listed him for sale, noting that he was “used to the [sugar] Baking Business.”⁵ The circumstances that brought Jack, Jolly, and Phebe to Baker are unknown. Jack likely worked in Baker’s sugaring business—his bakehouse, warehouse, and shop were located adjacent to the mansion—while Jolly and Phebe may have done domestic work in the Baker household.

By 1779, Baker was in his mid-seventies and in failing health. Slavery was increasingly seen as incompatible with the ideals of the American Revolution during this era, and a growing number of enslavers in Baker’s position were arranging for the emancipation of those they held in bondage. Rather than free Jack, Jolly, and Phebe, however, Baker only stipulated that Phebe be emancipated once she reached adulthood. Until then, she was forced to work for his heirs. Jack and Jolly were likewise bequeathed to Baker’s heirs, who were free to sell them or keep them in bondage for the rest of their lives.⁶ Luckily, Jolly and Phebe were eventually emancipated, although Jack’s fate is unknown. Jolly was free by 1786 when she married a man named Jack Ball.⁷ Phebe was a free woman by November 1789 when she married Cato Hancock, who had formerly been enslaved by merchant Thomas Hancock and his famous nephew John. Sadly, Phebe apparently died by July 1791 when her husband married another woman. Her exact date of death and burial place are unknown.⁸

1. Probate file of John Baker, 1780, case no. 17170, Suffolk County Probate Records. [↵](#)

2. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1700 to 1851* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1898), 181. [↵](#)

3. “To Be Sold By Mr. John Baker,” *New-England Weekly Journal (Boston)*, August 26, 1735. [↵](#)

4. Probate file of Andrew Sigourney, 1762, case no. 13118, Suffolk County Probate Records. [↵](#)

5. *The Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, October 5, 1761, pp. 3.[↵](#)

6. Probate file of John Baker, 1780, case no. 17170, Suffolk County Probate Records.[↵](#)

7. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 456.[↵](#)

8. Pamela Athearn Filbert, “Curious and Curiouser,” *Vita Bevis: A Resource for Family History from AmericanAncestors.org*, February 25, 2019, <https://vitabrevis.americanancestors.org/2019/02/curiouser>.[↵](#)

Baker Sugarhouse

Home of Wenham Cary and Jenny Foster Cary
Approximate modern address: 90 Salem Street
Historic street name: Back Street

The sugarhouse of John Baker once stood on this site. It was here that Baker and a team of workers, some of whom were enslaved, rendered countless gallons of West Indian molasses into loaves of sugar.¹ Following Baker’s death in 1780, the building fell into disuse and was eventually turned into housing. In 1789, it became the last known address of Wenham Cary, a free Black sailor whose kidnapping and attempted sale into slavery a year earlier led to Massachusetts finally banning the slave trade.²

A veteran of the American Revolution, Cary moved to Boston in 1780 from the nearby town of Medford.³ According to his enlistment records, Cary was five-feet-four-inches tall, had a dark complexion, and was born around 1743.⁴ He spent at least part of his youth working for Richard Cary, a wealthy merchant from Charlestown (and whose last name Wenham later adopted). Richard once described Wenham as his former “servant,” but this term held multiple meanings at the time. Wenham may have worked for wages, he may have been indentured (worked without pay for a set period of time), or he may have been enslaved.⁵ He was a free man, however, by the time he relocated to Boston. Shortly after his arrival, he married a free Black woman named Jenny Foster, about whom little is known.⁶

Black transplants from smaller towns often came to Boston in search of work and a sense of community. Like many Black men, Cary worked intermittently as a sailor and laborer, and the bustling wharves of the North End would have provided him with ample job opportunities. Meanwhile, the African Lodge on Water Street—the only masonic lodge in the U.S. open to people of color—was one of the main sources of community for Black men during this period. The lodge traced its roots to 1775 when fifteen Black men, led by noted abolitionist and civil rights activist Prince Hall, tried to join Boston’s all-white St. John’s Lodge. The men were rejected and subsequently organized their own lodge. In 1784, they received an official charter from the Grand Lodge of England, the preeminent masonic lodge in the world.⁷ Cary joined the African Lodge around this time.⁸ In the aftermath of his kidnapping, Cary’s brother mason Prince Hall was instrumental in getting the Massachusetts government to pass new protections for Black sailors and ban state residents from taking part in the slave trade.

Cary initially lived in a tenement building on Sheafe Street, only a short distance away from potential jobs on the waterfront.⁹ One morning in February 1788, he left for work and did not return home. As later reported in the Boston press, Cary had been hired to perform some maintenance work aboard a

ship anchored in Boston Harbor. The job offer turned out to be a ruse. Shortly after reporting to the vessel, its captain—a Cape Ann native named Solomon Babson—locked Cary below deck along with two other Black Bostonians, Cato Newell and Luck Fletcher. Babson then fled the harbor, bound for the slave markets of the Caribbean. These types of kidnappings were disturbingly common during this era. There was a constant demand for enslaved workers in the Caribbean and the American South and unscrupulous sea captains like Babson were happy to supply that demand by any means necessary.¹⁰

News of the kidnappings sparked widespread outrage in Boston. Massachusetts Governor John Hancock circulated a letter notifying his counterparts in the American South and Caribbean to be on the lookout for the missing men and Jeremy Belknap, a white Congregationalist minister and historian, drafted a petition calling for the abolition of the slave trade and prosecution of slave traders. Belknap also asked Prince Hall to write up his own petition and pass it around the Black community.¹¹ Hall and Belknaps' petitions were submitted together, and the legislature soon passed a law that banned Massachusetts residents from taking part in the slave trade and provided financial assistance to the families of anyone “kidnapped or decoyed away from the Commonwealth.”¹²

Cary and his fellow captives, meanwhile, were brought to the Swedish colony of Saint Barthélemy. Luckily, the island's governor was suspicious about the arrival of a slave ship from Massachusetts and prevented the sale of Cary, Newell, and Fletcher until he could learn more about their origins. Once Hancock's letter arrived in Saint Barthélemy, the governor's suspicions were confirmed, and he arranged for the return of the kidnapped Bostonians.¹³

Cary arrived home in July 1788. Within a year, he—and presumably his wife Jenny—had moved into the repurposed sugarhouse.¹⁴ Cary lived there until 1790, at which point a Boston tax assessor noted that he was away on a sailing voyage.¹⁵ Cary apparently never returned, suggesting that he died at sea.

1. When Baker's business partner died in 1761, for example, his estate included an enslaved man named Prince who was “used to the [sugar] Baking Business.” Probate file of Andrew Sigourney, 1762, case no. 13118, Suffolk County Probate Records; *The Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, October 5, 1761, pp. 3.[↵]

2. “List for Ward No. 1, 1789,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1789 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821.[↵]

3. Cary was still a Medford taxpayer in 1779. “1779 Tax Records,” *Medford Tax Record 1778-1817*, vol. 4. Accessed through Ancestry.com.

He was in Boston by May 10, 1780 when he married a woman named Jenny Foster. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 446.[↵]

4. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1897), 179.[↵]

5. Sueanna Smith, “Reimagining Prince Hall: Race, Freemasonry, and Material Culture in Boston, 1775-1870,” PhD diss., (University of South Carolina, 2021), 63.[↵]

6. Cary was referred to as a “free negroe” in his 1780 marriage record. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston*, 446.[↵]

7. “A Brief History of African Lodge 459,” *The Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge*, <https://princehall.org/african-lodge-459/> (accessed July 18, 2024).[↵]

8. Cary’s name appeared in a list of twelve Black men who presented a petition to the Massachusetts legislature in January 1787. Historian Kersuze Simeon-Jones identified these individuals as members of the African Lodge.

Petition of Samuel [sic] Stevens, Jan. 4, 1787, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, House Unpassed Legislation, 1787, Docket 2358, SC1/series 230, Massachusetts Archives, Boston, Mass.

Kersuze Simeon-Jones, *Literary and Sociopolitical Writings of the Black Diaspora in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 13. [↵]

9. Analysis of the Ward 1 taking books from 1780 – 1790, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵]

10. David Hackett Fischer, *African Founders: How Enslaved People Expanded American Ideals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022), 90-91. [↵]

11. Smith, “Reimagining Prince Hall,” 64-81. [↵]

12. Smith, “Reimagining Prince Hall,” 84-85. [↵]

13. Benjamin D. Remillard, “‘What then are our Lives and Leberties Worth’: The 18th Century Kidnapping Case that Shook Boston,” *The Beehive*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.masshist.org/bee hiveblog/2022/01/what-then-are-our-lives-and-lebeties-worth-the-18th-century-kidnapping-case-that-shook-boston/>. [↵]

14. “List for Ward No. 1, 1789,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1789 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵]

15. “List for Ward No. 1, 1790,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1790 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵]

Rand Estate

Home of Prince Rand

Approximate modern address: 7 Hanover Street
Historic street name: Middle Street

On this site stood the home of Isaac Rand, Jr. Prince Rand—a man once enslaved by Isaac’s father—also lived on the property in the 1790s.¹ According to a contemporary description of Prince, he was short and slightly built with a tan complexion, an “aquiline nose,” and long hair that he wore in a ponytail.²

Prince was born around 1749. He later recounted that he was from a nation deep in the interior of Africa. There, he spent his early years, attending an Islamic school and learning to read and write.

When he was still a child, Prince—whose birth name is unknown—was abducted by slave traders, marched to the coast, and forced onto a ship bound for North America. He was eventually purchased by Dr. Isaac Rand, Sr. of Cambridge, Massachusetts.³ It was likely Dr. Rand who renamed the young captive “Prince,” a common name given to enslaved men and boys at the time.

Isaac, Sr. was a physician and cofounder of the Massachusetts Medical Society.⁴ Prince was forced to work as his family’s domestic servant, handling all manner of household tasks in the Rand mansion.⁵ After Massachusetts abolished slavery in the early 1780s, Prince remained with Dr. Rand and worked for wages. Such arrangements were common during this era, as recently emancipated people had relatively few job options. In his 1787 will, Isaac, Sr. asked his family to continue employing Prince after his death. If they failed to do so, his will required them to pay their former “servant” a generous yearly stipend for the rest of his life.⁶ The doctor’s heirs honored his request and Prince worked for several members of the Rand family after Isaac, Sr.’s death, including Isaac, Jr.

Like his father, Isaac, Jr. was a physician. He oversaw one of the most successful medical practices in Boston.⁷ Prince began working for his former enslaver’s son around 1794.⁸ Isaac, Jr.’s Middle Street estate consisted of his three-story mansion, a detached kitchen, barns, and several tenements.⁹ Prince may have lived in one of these latter buildings during his time as Isaac, Jr.’s domestic servant. Ultimately, Prince did not stay in Boston for very long. By 1800, he was living in Charlestown and working for another member of the Rand family.¹⁰ It was there that he died nine years later.¹¹

1. “List of Ward No. 4, May 3, 1794,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1794 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

2. “Register of Deaths,” *The American Register, or General Repository of History, Politics, and Science: Part I for 1809* V (1809): 265; William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.: Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts* vol. 3 (Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1911): 422. [↵](#)

3. “Register of Deaths,” 265. [↵](#)

4. *The American Quarterly Register*, vol. XIII (Boston: T.R. Marvin, 1841): 83. [↵](#)

5. He was described as such in Jane Rand’s will. Probate Records of Jane Rand, 1805, no. 18324, Middlesex County, Massachusetts Probate Papers. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

6. Probate Records of Isaac Rand, 1790, no. 18323, Middlesex County, Massachusetts Probate Papers. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

7. “Isaac Rand, M.D.,” *The American Quarterly Register* XIII, no. 1 (August, 1840): 83. [↵](#)

8. “List of Ward No. 4, May 3, 1794,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1794 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

9. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Statistics of the United States’ Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1900), 200. [↵](#)

10. Entry for Prince Rand, 1800 U.S. Census, Charlestown, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, page 10. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

11. “Died,” *Boston Courier*, February 16, 1809. [↵](#)

New North Writing School

Approximate modern address: 7 Hanover Street
Historic street name: Middle Street

Near this spot stood the New North Writing School, a public institution that taught North End children the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic.¹ In 1789, a group of Black Bostonians asked the city for permission to hold religious services in the school. The group consisted of individuals who had withdrawn from Boston’s majority-white churches because of widespread discrimination. City authorities rejected their request but did give them permission to meet in another schoolhouse across town.² It was in this West Street school that Black religious leaders met in August 1805 and organized the African Baptist Church, the first Black church in Boston.³ The congregation moved into the African Meeting House on Joy Street the following year.⁴ Ultimately, no Black church was established in the North End and its African American residents were left without a convenient, discrimination-free place to worship.

1. The location of the school was specified in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. IV: Transactions, 1899, 1900* (1904): 118.

For more on the history of the school, please see: Appendix IX in Pauline Holmes, *A Tercentenary History of the Boston Public Latin School, 1635-1935* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935).

For more on writing schools, please see: Edward S. Gault, “An Introduction to Education in Early Massachusetts,” *The Paul Revere House*, Jan. 28, 2021, <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/an-introduction-to-education-in-early-massachusetts/#:~:text=As%20the%20population%20of%20Boston,West%20and%20Tremont%20streets%20today> [↵](#)

2. Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 42. [↵](#)

3. Depending on one’s definition of a “church,” this could be considered the second Black congregation in Boston. In 1693, a group of Black worshippers in the North End—with the help of Cotton Mather—joined together in a religious “society.” However, this short-lived society was never legally incorporated as a church. Alex R. Goldfeld, *The North End: A Brief History of Boston’s Oldest Neighborhood* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013), 35-36. [↵](#)

4. J. Marcus Mitchell, “The Paul Family,” *Old Time New England*, 73. [↵](#)

Clark Rental Property

Home of Butterfield and Clarissa Scotland, William Eaton, and Joel Holden
Approximate modern address: 218 Hanover Street
Historic street name: Middle Street

In the late eighteenth century, this was the site of a tenement building that catered primarily to people of color. It was owned by William Clarke (or Clark), a white physician who lived on Fish Street. At the time of Clarke's death in 1787, the property was rented by Butterfield and Clarissa Scotland, William Eaton, and Joel Holden.¹

The Scotlands were transplants from Philadelphia who had recently moved to Boston. It is unknown what brought the couple to New England, but they were likely among the tens of thousands of people who took to the road in postrevolutionary America in search of economic opportunity and a better life. Butterfield worked as a laborer, a transient line of work that kept him and Clarissa moving even within Boston. By 1790, they were in the South End, where they started a family and became members of Trinity Church. A few years later, they relocated to the Black neighborhood on the north slope of Beacon Hill.² The Scotlands' time in Boston ended around 1800 when they headed south to New York City.³

William Eaton and Joel Holden likewise led very mobile lives. Unfortunately, very little information is known about Eaton. By 1790, he had moved to State Street in West Boston, then disappeared from the historical record.⁴ Slightly more is known about Holden. Described in different historical records as either Black or "mulatto," he likely had European and/or Indigenous ancestry in addition to his African heritage. In 1795, he married a member of the Massachusetts nation named Margery Moho.⁵ The pair purchased a small lot of land in the North End shortly after their marriage but did not stay in the area for long. By 1800, they had moved to Margery's hometown of Canton, where they lived until Joel's death twelve years later.⁶

1. Probate file of William Clark, 1787, case no. 18813, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Probate Files.[↵](#)
2. Jacqueline Barbara Carr, *After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775-1800* (Northeastern University Press, 2005), 1-6.[↵](#)
3. United States Census Bureau, 1810 federal census, Ward 6, New York, New York, pp. 178.[↵](#)
4. Taking Book Ward No. 10, 1790, "City of Boston Tax Records, 1790, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)
5. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 415.[↵](#)
6. Daniel V. T. Huntoon, *History of the Town of Canton, Norfolk County, Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson & Son, 1893), 27.[↵](#)

Hays Estate

Home of Caesar
Approximate modern address: 209 Hanover Street
Historic street name: Middle Street

This area was once part of the Hays estate. Moses Michael Hays purchased the property in 1791.¹ Born in New York to Jewish immigrants from the Netherlands, Hays came to Boston in the early 1780s by way of Newport, Rhode Island. Hays was one of Boston's first Jewish residents and despite the town's history of religious intolerance soon established himself as a successful businessman, importing goods from the Caribbean and China, as well as selling insurance.² Paul Revere made several pieces of silver that Hays commissioned.³ The property on Middle Street reflected Hays' financial success. A house already stood on the lot, but there was also enough space for him to build a new mansion, later described as one of the most luxurious homes in Boston.⁴ Hays and his wife, Rachel Myers Hays, moved into this new structure with their younger children, while their adult son Judah moved into the older house.⁵

Like other wealthy Bostonians, the Hayses had teams of servants to manage their homes. One of these domestic workers was a Black man known only as Caesar, who worked for the Hays family from around 1796-1799.⁶ Unfortunately, nothing is known about Caesar's background. Given his first name—commonly given to enslaved men and boys at the time—as well as his lack of a recorded last name, he had likely once been enslaved. Caesar disappeared from the historical record after 1799.

1. Leonard V. Borland, grantor, to Moses Hays, grantee, October 1791, Suffolk County, Massachusetts Register of Deeds, vol. 170, pp. 259. [↵](#)

2. "Insurance & Broker's Office," *Independent Chronicle (Boston)*, Mar. 21, 1782; "Bohea Tea," *The American Herald (Boston)*, Jun. 21, 1784. [↵](#)

3. The 2019 exhibition *Beyond Midnight: Paul Revere* at the New York Historical, for example, featured two Revere-made goblets that Hays may have used as Kiddush cups. "The Truth Behind the Legend of Paul Revere Revealed in a New Exhibition at the New-York Historical Society," *The New York Historical*, Jun. 25, 2019, <https://www.nyhistory.org/press/truth-behind-legend-patriot-paul-revere-revealed-new-exhibition-new-york-historical>. [↵](#)

4. Zelda F. Popkin, "Jewish Dolly Madisons," *The American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger* 109 no. 20 (September 1921): 514. [↵](#)

5. "Taking Book Ward No. 5, 1793," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1793*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820. [↵](#)

6. This is based on an analysis of the taking books from Ward 4 from 1796-1799. [↵](#)

Goldthwait Estate

Home of Jack Codman

Approximate modern address: Rose Kennedy Greenway near the southeast corner of Hanover and Cross Streets

Historic street name: Middle Street

This was once the site of a three-story mansion owned by Ezekiel Goldthwait and Elizabeth Lewis Goldthwait. One wing of the house was used as a stable and servants' quarters.¹ As of 1784, it was home to a free Black man named Jack Codman, who may have once been enslaved on the premises.²

In 1769, Boston businesswoman Elizabeth Murray gave the Goldthwaits an enslaved man named Jack.³ Originally from Scotland, Murray had established herself as a successful shopkeeper in Boston

after immigrating to North America in the 1740s. As tensions rose between the American colonies and Great Britain, however, she decided to return to Europe and part with much of her property in New England.

Like Murray, the Goldthwaits were firmly entrenched in Boston high society. Although little is known of Elizabeth's background, her husband was active in local politics and a major landowner.⁴ By the time he died in 1782, Jack may have been emancipated, as he was not mentioned in Goldthwait's probate records.⁵ Two years later, Boston tax collectors recorded a free Black man named Jack Codman living with the widowed Elizabeth.⁶ This may have been the same individual whom the Goldthwaits held in bondage. His last name suggests some type of connection to the white Codman family, who enslaved numerous people in nearby Charlestown. If Jack Codman was indeed the same man given to Ezekiel and Elizabeth Goldthwait, he may have been enslaved by the Codmans prior to Elizabeth Murray. After 1784, Jack Codman disappeared from the historical record.

1. Charlotte Goldthwaite, *Goldthwaite Genealogy* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Press, 1899), 85-86.[↵](#)
2. "Taking Book Ward No. 5, 1784," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1784*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)
3. Patricia Cleary, *Elizabeth Murray: A Woman's Pursuit of Independence in Eighteenth-Century America* (University of Massachusetts Press), 114.[↵](#)
4. Goldthwaite, *Goldthwaite Genealogy*, 84-87.[↵](#)
5. Probate file of Ezekiel Goldthwait, 1783, case no. 17872, Suffolk County Probate Records. [↵](#)
6. "Taking Book Ward No. 5, 1784," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1784*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

Kast Property

Home of Cato Kast

Approximate modern address: Southeast corner of North Street Park

Historic street name: Fish Street

A free Black servant named Cato Kast lived and worked at this property in 1789.¹ The property was owned by Thomas Kast, a German-American Harvard graduate and physician.² Nothing is known about Cato's life prior to working for Thomas. His last name suggests that he may have been enslaved by a member of the Kast family, but there's no evidence that Thomas himself was ever an enslaver.

As the personal servant of a physician, Cato may have done work related to Thomas' medical practice in addition to more typical household duties. It's likely, for example, that his duties included preparing medicines, laundering bandages, and washing medical instruments, like the surgeon's tools that Thomas bought from Paul Revere in 1770s.³ Ultimately, Cato only lived and worked with Thomas for around a year. By 1790, he no longer appeared in Boston city records.

1. "Taking Book Ward No. 4, 1789," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1789*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

2. Thomas' father Philip was also a physician. Originally from southern Germany, he settled in Boston by the time Thomas was born in 1750. After graduating college, Thomas served as a surgeon in the Royal Navy and worked in various hospitals in London before moving back to his hometown in 1774. Edwin Griffin Porter, *Rambles in Old Boston, New England* (Boston: Cupples & Hurd, 1887), 131-132.[↵]

3. Mark Hurwitz, "The People in the Pews: Dr. Thomas Kast," *Old North*, Oct. 19, 2020, <https://oldnorth.com/blog/dr-thomas-kast/>.[↵]

Morton Property

Home of Perez Morton
Approximate modern address: MA-1A
Historic street name: Fish Street

This property was once home to a white attorney named Perez Morton. In November 1777, a man enslaved by Boston cooper Nathan Spear visited Morton and asked for help in obtaining his freedom. The man, whose name has been lost to history, was one of a growing number of enslaved people in Massachusetts who tried to sue for their freedom during this period.¹

Originally from Plymouth, Morton was a twenty-seven-year-old Harvard graduate with a history of representing Black clients. In recent months, he had helped an enslaved sailor secure lost wages that he had been promised by his enslaver and secured the liberty of an enslaved woman who had allegedly been born free.² Morton's latest client claimed that Spear had repeatedly promised to set him free at a later date but kept putting it off. He hoped that Morton would sue his enslaver and secure his immediate emancipation.³

These types of freedom suits had been filed in Massachusetts since the seventeenth century. The New England colonies were unique in allowing people to sue their enslavers, and dozens took advantage to try and obtain their freedom. Most freedom suits in Massachusetts were filed during the revolutionary era, as rhetoric about "rights" and "liberty" became more common. These suits were often filed by freeborn people who had been kidnapped and forced into slavery or people whose enslavers had signed documents agreeing to set them free but never followed through.⁴

Spear, however, had never signed any contract promising to emancipate the man who now called on Morton. The young attorney agreed to talk to Spear about writing up such a document, but Spear refused, telling Morton that it was none of his business. The enraged Spear then took to the press to denounce Morton as an antislavery radical whose ultimate goal was the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts. According to Spear, such an action risked alienating the Southern states and destroying the Union, a development that would surely lead to American defeat in the ongoing Revolution.⁵ For his part, Morton publicly denied these charges, going so far as to claim that he had no problem with slavery and that his past actions on behalf of enslaved people were simply motivated by a desire to follow the law as it was written.⁶

As for the unnamed individual at the center of this dispute, he was likely emancipated at some point in the following decade. Spear enslaved several men during this period, all of whom later appeared in the historical record as freedmen.

1. Boston vital records show that Nathan Spear enslaved numerous people, including men named Cato, London, and Cesar (who later married Chloe Bradford and is discussed elsewhere in this map).[↵](#)
2. “To the Public,” *The Boston Gazette*, April 27, 1778.[↵](#)
3. Ibid.[↵](#)
4. Edward L. Bell, “Research Summaries of Massachusetts Freedom Suits, 1660-1784,” unpublished draft manuscript, last revised April 18, 2022; Emily Blanck, “Seventeen-Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts,” *The New England Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (March 2002):27.[↵](#)
5. “To the Public,” *The Boston Gazette*, May 11, 1778; James Spear Loring, “Spear Family Record,” *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* XVIII (1864): 160 [↵](#)
6. “To the Public,” *The Boston Gazette*, April 27, 1778. [↵](#)

Adams Home and Barbershop

Home of Andrew Telford and Peter Choice

Approximate modern address: South end of the North Bennet Street School

Historic street name: Fish Street

James Adams was a white barber who employed two Black journeymen at his shop in the early nineteenth century. Andrew Telford lived and worked with Adams in 1800.¹ The twenty-year-old Telford was originally from Providence and stayed with Adams for about a year.² He eventually settled in the West End where he opened a successful barbershop of his own.³

Peter Choice was employed by Adams from around 1801-1802. Little is known about Choice’s background, but he may have been a descendant of Peter Choyce (or Choise), a “Negro man” from Scituate who was emancipated in the will of his enslaver in 1748.⁴ Unlike his predecessor in Adams’ shop, Choice did not stay in Boston for very long. In August 1802, he married a woman named Hannah Allen at the First Baptist Church and the couple soon moved to Haverhill.⁵ There, Hannah gave birth to three children over the next four years: Hannah, Peter, and Charles Allen.⁶ Peter, meanwhile, opened a barbershop where he dressed hair in the “newest styles” and made “ornamental hair for ladies and wigs and skull caps for gentlemen.”⁷ He also developed a number of inventions, like a an improved toothbrush (pictured above), a tonic that eliminated dandruff, and the “Cordial of Life,” which supposedly cured everything from the common cold to headaches and dizziness. According to Peter, he had secured patent protections for all these items.⁸ If this were indeed the case, it would make him one of the first African Americans to receive a patent in the United States.

In 1807, Peter and his family moved again, this time to Hartford, Connecticut. In addition to his hairdressing business, Peter began cutting silhouette portraits around this time.⁹ It’s unclear where he learned this art, but his experience with scissors would have translated well into his new business venture. The Choice family likely lived in Hartford until around 1817, when they disappeared from the historical record.¹⁰

1. “Taking Book Ward No. 5, 1800,” *City of Boston Tax Records, 1800*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780-1820.[↵](#)

2. His birthplace and birth year were listed in the 1850 federal census. U.S. Census Bureau, 1850 federal census, Ward 6, Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, pp. 186, enumerated August 24, 1850.↵
3. National Park Service, “Smith Court Residences,” *Boston African American National Historic Site*, accessed June 12, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/boaf/learn/historyculture/smith-court-residences.htm>.↵
4. Will of Mary Booth, 1748, Plymouth County Probate Records, vol. 13, pp. 293. ↵
5. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 209.↵
6. Topsfield Historical Society, *Vital Records of Haverhill, Massachusetts to the Year 1849*, vol. I (Topsfield Historical Society, 1910), 64.↵
7. “Peter Choice,” *Haverhill (Mass.) Museum*, March 5, 1805.↵
8. “New Inventions,” *New-England Palladium (Boston)*, September 4, 1807.↵
9. James Hammond Trumbull, *The Memorial History of Hartford County, Connecticut, 1633-1884*, vol. I (Boston: Edward L. Osgood, 1886), 596. ↵
10. Nancy Finlay, “Black on White: Silhouettes of Hartford’s Morgan Family,” *Connecticut Public Radio*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.ctpublic.org/arts-and-culture/2014-02-07/black-on-white-silhouettes-of-hartfords-morgan-...>.↵

John Bull House

Home of Abel Barbadoes and Chloe Holloway Barbadoes
Approximate modern address: North Bennet Street School
Historic street name: Fish Street

The home and bakeshop of John Bull, a white baker, once stood on this lot. From around 1788-1799, Bull rented the rear portion of his house to Abel Barbadoes and his wife Chloe Holloway Barbadoes.¹ Abel went on to become one of Boston’s best known African American masons, and it was here that he may have learned his trade.

Abel Barbadoes and Chloe Holloway were married in Boston on September 27, 1782.² Neither of them was originally from the community. The twenty-three-year-old Holloway had moved to Boston from Hallowell, Maine.³ Unfortunately, little else is known about her early life apart from her approximate birth year and hometown. Barbadoes, meanwhile, was from Lexington, Massachusetts. He was born around 1751 to Quawk and Kate Barbadoes. It is unknown whether Abel was born into slavery, but the Barbadoes family was free by 1756.⁴

Abel and Chloe moved into a boarding house on Brattle Square shortly after their marriage. At the time, Abel worked as a domestic servant for the building’s owner.⁵ The couple relocated to John Bull’s house by 1788.⁶ There, Abel began working as a laborer. He also may have begun training as a mason, as he was known as such by 1801.⁷ The North End was in the midst of a housing boom, and

Abel likely found plenty of work building new boarding houses and tenements.⁸ Indeed, within a decade he had earned enough money to buy his own piece of land. The plot was in a more middle-class Black neighborhood in West Boston and its purchase signaled the Barbadoes family's social mobility.⁹

Abel, Chloe, and their three children moved to their new property in early 1799.¹⁰ Approximately six years later, Abel began working on the highest profile contract of his career—one that is still visible in the Boston cityscape. Financial records show that he performed the bulk of the masonry work on the African Meeting House.¹¹ This three-story brick structure was at the heart of the West End's Black community and exists today as the Museum of African American History.

Abel and Chloe lived out their days in the West End. Abel passed away in 1817 and was laid to rest in Copps Hill Burying Ground—indeed, his is one of the only marked graves belonging to an African American in that cemetery.¹² Chloe outlived her husband by several decades, dying in 1843. She was interred in the South Burying Ground.¹³

1. Analysis of the Ward 5 taking books from 1796 – 1811, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

2. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages From 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 450. [↵](#)

3. Chloe's birthplace was listed in her daughter Catherine's death record. Entry for Catherine L. Barbadoes, "Deaths Registered in the City of Boston for the Year eighteen hundred and eighty-eight," Massachusetts Death Records, 1841-1915. Accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)

4. "Abel Barbadoes," *Copps Hill Burying Ground: Mapping Black Gravesites*, <https://chstudentproject.com/profiles/abel-barbados/> (accessed July 13, 2024). [↵](#)

5. "Taking Book of Ward No. 8," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1784 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 12*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

6. "Ward No. 5, List for 1788," *City of Boston Tax Records, 1788 Taking Books, Wards 1 – 11*, Boston Public Library, City of Boston Tax Records, 1780 – 1821. [↵](#)

7. Tax records described the former domestic servant as a laborer during the 1790s. His work must have involved masonry, as he was recognized as a mason by 1801. [↵](#)

8. Sueanna Smith, "Reimagining Prince Hall: Race, Freemasonry, and Material Culture in Boston, 1775-1870," PhD diss., (University of South Carolina, 2021), 42. [↵](#)

9. Crunnell [Cromwell] Barnes, grantor, to Abel Barbadoes, grantee, January 30, 1797, Suffolk County Register of Deeds, vol. 185, page 124. [↵](#)

10. Tax records place them in Ward 5 as of December 1798. The May 1799 Taking Book was the first to show them at their property on Joy Street (at the time known as Belknap Lane). [↵](#)

11. "Building the African Meeting House," *The West End Museum*, <https://thewestendmuseum.org/history/era/west-boston/building-the-african-meeting-house/> (accessed July 13, 2024). [↵](#)

12. Dart Adams, “The Forgotten Legacies of Boston’s Historic Black Graveyard,” *Boston Magazine*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2022/05/03/black-graveyard-legacy/> (accessed July 13, 2024). ↵

13. Entry for Chloe Barbadoes, Deaths Registered in the City of Boston (Listed Alphabetically) from 1801 to 1848 Inclusive. Accessed through Ancestry.com. ↵

Clark Mansion

Home of Pompey Clarke
Approximate modern address: North Bennet Street School
Historic street name: Fish Street

The American Revolution provided enslaved Bostonians with several avenues for pursuing their freedom. Some took advantage of wartime chaos and disappeared into the New England countryside. Others confronted their enslavers about the hypocrisy of slavery existing in a country that was ostensibly fighting for liberty and negotiated their emancipation. Still others—like the man who once lived at this site—sought refuge with the British army.

Pompey Clarke was enslaved at this property in the late eighteenth century. His enslaver was Dr. William Clarke (or Clark), a prominent North End physician and landlord. During the Siege of Boston from 1775-1776, Dr. Clarke and his family were likely among the thousands of people who fled the city.¹ Pompey, meanwhile, probably stayed behind to watch over Clarke’s property. In March 1776, after nearly a year of occupation, the British commander General Howe finally ordered the evacuation of Boston. In addition to the thousands of troops stationed in the city, Howe also agreed to evacuate any Bostonians who pledged their loyalty to the British Crown. At least six enslaved people were among the hundreds of civilians who took him up on this offer, including Pompey.²

It is unknown whether Pompey Clarke was truly a supporter of the British government, or if he simply saw the evacuation as a chance to gain his freedom. By 1783, he was living in British-occupied New York City and working in the medical department of the British army. As the Revolution came to an end, British authorities formally granted the thousands of Black Loyalists in New York their freedom and began transporting them to Nova Scotia. Clarke, for example, boarded the brig *Ranger* in November bound for Port Mouton.³

Clarke was one of approximately 3,500 formerly enslaved Americans who settled in Nova Scotia during this era.⁴ Like their white counterparts, these Black Loyalists were promised land grants by the British government upon arrival. These promises were slow to be fulfilled, however, and in 1787 Clarke signed a petition requesting that the provincial government set up a settlement for Black Nova Scotians in Sydney County (split into present-day Antigonish and Guysborough Counties in the 1830s).⁵ The petition was successful, and Clarke and his co-petitioners were granted forty acres of land each.⁶ Census records last listed Pompey Clarke at his Sydney County farm in 1817, after which point he disappeared from the historical record.⁷

1. It’s estimated that Boston’s civilian population dropped from around 15,000 to 3,500 during this period. Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York University Press, 2006), 123. ↵

2. Information about Pompey was later compiled in the so-called *Book of Negroes*, a register of several thousand Black Loyalists who settled in Nova Scotia after the American Revolution. Today,

this text is housed in the Nova Scotia Archives. Guy Carleton, 1st Baron Dorchester: Papers, The National Archives, Kew (PRO 30/55/100) 10427 pages 150-151.[↵]

3. Ibid.[↵]

4. For book-length studies of these Nova Scotia settlers, see: James W. St. G. Walker's *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (2017) and Ruth Holmes Whitehead's *Black Loyalists: Southern Settlers of Nova Scotia's First Free Black Communities* (2021).[↵]

5. "Black Loyalist Communities in Nova Scotia," *Nova Scotia Museum*, accessed June 12, 2026, <https://museum.novascotia.ca/stories/black-loyalist-communities-nova-scotia>.[↵]

6. Black Loyalists, "Communities," *Black Loyalists: Our History and Our People*, accessed June 12, 2026, <https://blackloyalist.com/cdc/communities/tracadie.htm>.[↵]

7. A return of the State of the District, Township, or Settlement of the Blacks of Tracadie in the County of Sydney, September 26, 1817. Accessed through Ancestry.com.[↵]

Lothrop Rental Property

Home of John Dennis

Approximate modern address: 140 Richmond Street
Historic street name: Corner of Proctor's Lane and Fish Street

Near this spot stood a rental property owned by John Lothrop, a white landlord who owned multiple buildings in the North End. For a brief period in the early nineteenth century, it was home to a Black barber named John Dennis. Very little is known about Dennis, apart from his occupation and the fact that he was originally from the West Indies.¹ He moved to this site on North Street in either late 1810 or early 1811 after previously renting a shop and apartment on Salem Street.² Sadly, he fell on hard times soon after moving to North Street and was forced to leave his new home and business after less than year.

Dennis was admitted to the Boston Almshouse in September 1811.³ This massive structure was located on the western edge of town, far from Dennis' home and shop.⁴ Almshouses formed the basis of poor relief in early American cities. They provided food, shelter, and medical care for those unable to support themselves due to factors like age, illness, or disability.⁵ Poverty in general was on the rise during this era due to the unstable nature of the early American economy and almost anyone could find themselves in the almshouse. The risk was especially high, however, for formerly enslaved people or recent immigrants.⁶ The exact circumstances that brought Dennis to the institution are unknown.

Despite the services offered by the Boston Almshouse, it was not necessarily a place that people wanted to go. Among the most common complaints levied against the institution were its overcrowding, poor food, and general unsanitary conditions.⁷ While some people checked themselves in voluntarily, others were brought in by local authorities.⁸ Dennis was likely among this latter group. Records show that he "ran away" the same day he was admitted.⁹ It is unknown where Dennis went after escaping the almshouse, but his body was found three weeks later. He was subsequently laid to rest in an unmarked grave in the South Burying Ground.¹⁰

1. Dennis' birthplace was listed as the "West Indies" in his Boston Almshouse admission record. Admission record for John Dennis, September 27, 1811, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society. [↵](#)
2. The section of Salem Street where he boarded was known as Back Street at the time and located in Ward 3. He was listed there as of the August 1810 enumeration of the 1810 U.S. Census. [↵](#)
3. Admission record for John Dennis, September 27, 1811, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society. [↵](#)
4. Heli Meltsner, *The Poorhouses of Massachusetts: A Cultural and Architectural History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 90-91. [↵](#)
5. Rebecca Jo Tannenbaum, *Health and Wellness in Colonial America: Health and Wellness in Daily Life* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2012), 111. [↵](#)
6. This is evident in the admission records of the Boston Almshouse. Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society. [↵](#)
7. "The Almshouse and the Workhouse," *Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, <https://www.colonialociety.org/node/3085#cho4> (accessed July 8, 2024). [↵](#)
8. "Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society Related to the Economically Disenfranchised: An Overview," *Massachusetts Historical Society*, <https://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fas0540> (accessed July 8, 2024). [↵](#)
9. Admission record for John Dennis, September 27, 1811, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733 – 1925, Almshouse records, 1735 – 1911, Alphabetical list of admissions, 1795 – 1817, Massachusetts Historical Society. [↵](#)
10. Death record for John Dennis, October 15, 1811, Boston Index of Deaths 1810 – 1848 H – F, accessed through Ancestry.com. [↵](#)