**PROVIDENCE WALKS: EARLY BLACK HISTORY**

**FROM THE BEGINNING: 1636–1865**

Providence history is Black history, from the early days of the colony to today. Roger Williams founded Providence in 1636 on land inhabited by the Narragansett, Wampanoag and other tribes. In 1737, British colonizers turned to the business of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery to support themselves. They imported captive Africans who helped to build this colony and others throughout the Western Hemisphere. Providence elites developed a system of laws and codes to uphold the business and the structure, and to ensure profit for the owning class. By the mid-1700s, Rhode Island slave traders were a dominant force in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the majority of the town’s and colony’s economy was connected in some way to the trade, including the production of goods such as rum, candles and iron. There was a clear economic interdependence with plantations in the Caribbean. Southern colonies and even Suriname, where ships docked to trade captives for goods like sugar and cotton. In 1784, Governor Stephen Hopkins wrote, “Without this [slave] trade, it would have been and will always be utterly impossible for the inhabitants of this colony to subsist themselves, or to pay for any considerable quantity of British goods.” The upper-class colonists would also have had to cook and clean for themselves.

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

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

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

**PIECING TOGETHER HISTORY**

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

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

**PROVIDENCE PERSONALITIES**

**Thomas Howland**

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

**Cudge Brown**

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

**William J. Brown**

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

**Eleanor Eldridge**

Eleanor Eldridge was a free Black and Narragansett woman born in 1794 with an entrepreneurial spirit. She owned a home on Spring Street, which was taken from her, but she sued to get it back. To help fend off legal fights to regain her lost property, she worked with author Frances McDougall in 1843 to pen “Memories of Eleanor Eldridge,” recounting her life. She died in 1862.

**Emmanuel “Manna” Bernoon**

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

**Shoemaker Family**

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

**Fibba Brown**

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

**Pero Paget**

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

**George Henry**

George Henry was born into slavery in 1819 in Virginia but escaped to Providence: A strategic thinker and skilled mariner, he was an entrepeneur, a community leader and sexton at St. Stephen’s Church, worked for school integration; and wrote a memoir, “Life of George Henry.”
A. POINT OF INTEREST

North Burial Ground

North Burial Ground, built in 1790, is one of the oldest cemeteries in Providence. A Black Heritage Trail Map is available for free in the office, once you can take a walk through the city of the dead and pay your respects. We encourage Patricia Borden, who in 1811 donated all of her money “to the relief of poor people of color.”

Cathedral of St. John & Burial Ground

The cathedral, originally built as King’s Church in 1722, was founded in part by the Triangle Trade. Enslavers and enslaved people both worshipped here. It is now the site of The Center for Reconciliation, an organization dedicated to educating the public about slavery and its impact.

B. POINT OF INTEREST

Mount Hope Shaking Garden

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

Roger Williams National Memorial

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

Snawtown

Snawtown 82 Smith Street

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

C. POINT OF INTEREST

Snawtown “Riot” Plaque

North End of Roger Williams National Memorial

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

D. POINT OF INTEREST

Providence Gazette

21 Meeting Street

The Providence Gazette was founded in 1778 and thrived until 1800. It became the voice of Rhode Island’s Black community, providing news and commentary on local and national events. The Gazette was a critical resource for enslaved people seeking information about freedom and opportunities for escape. Today, the Providence Gazette’s archives are preserved at the Rhode Island Historical Society, where visitors can explore the history of Rhode Island’s Black community through print and digital archives.

The Old Brick School House

24 Meeting Street

The Old Brick School House is a historic building in the heart of Providence. It was built in 1772 and served as a schoolhouse for over 120 years. The building was later converted into a community center and is now open to the public. Visitors can explore the history of education in Rhode Island and learn about the contributions of African-American educators to the field.

Cranston Street Baptist Church

17 Cranston Street

Cranston Street Baptist Church is a historic African-American church located in Providence. Founded in 1835, it is one of the oldest continually operating African-American churches in the city. The church has a long history of activism and community involvement, including its role in the Civil Rights Movement. Visitors can explore the church’s rich history and learn about the work it has done to support and empower the local community.

Market Square & Market House

4 Market Square

Market House was built by many hands beginning in 1775. Black laborers were essential in the work, beginning with site preparation, masonry, material-gathering and more throughout the whole process. Pero Paget, Thomas Shoemaker and Pomp Smith all made significant contributions to the work, beginning with site preparation, masonry, material-gathering and more throughout the whole process. Pero Paget, Thomas Shoemaker and Pomp Smith all made significant contributions to the building of Market House.

Sally Gallery at John Brown House

52 House Street

Sally Gallery at John Brown House is a historic site in Providence. It was the home of Dr. Jabez Bowen, a physician and abolitionist, and his wife, Sally. The gallery features exhibits that highlight the life of Dr. Bowen and his wife, as well as their contributions to the abolitionist movement. The gallery is open to the public and is a popular destination for visitors interested in Rhode Island history and the antebellum period.

E. POINT OF INTEREST

Joseph Brown House

50 South Main Street

Joseph Brown House was once owned by Dr. Jabez Bowen, an abolitionist and physician. The house is located in the historic downtown district of Providence and features exhibits that highlight the life of Dr. Bowen and his wife, Sally. The gallery is open to the public and is a popular destination for visitors interested in Rhode Island history and the antebellum period.

Providence Shelter for Colored Children

3200 Point Street

Providence Shelter for Colored Children is a historic site in Providence. It was founded in 1866 as a boarding school for African-American children. The school later evolved into a shelter that provided temporary housing for children in need of care. Today, the site is recognized as a state landmark and is open to the public. Visitors can explore the history of the shelter and learn about its role in providing care and support to children in need.

India Point Park

On the waterfront near the old site of the whale market, India Point Park offers a panoramic view of the Providence River. It is a popular destination for visitors interested in Rhode Island history and the waterfront. The park is open to the public and is a great place to relax and enjoy the scenery.

The Sally House

The Sally House is a historic site in Providence. It was the home of Dr. Jabez Bowen, an abolitionist and physician, and his wife, Sally. The house is located in the downtown district of Providence and features exhibits that highlight the life of Dr. Bowen and his wife. The gallery is open to the public and is a popular destination for visitors interested in Rhode Island history and the antebellum period.