PIECING TOGETHER HISTORY

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

“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

**Cudge Brown**
Cudge Brown was enslaved by Moses Brown and then manumitted by Brown in 1768. He married freedwoman Phyllis, 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.

**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 fund her legal fight to regain the lost property, she worked with author Frances McDougall in 1843 to pen “Memoirs of Eleanor Eldridge,” recounting her life. She died in 1862.

**Emmanuel “Manna” Bernoon**
Emmanuel “Manna” Bernoon and his mother, Amey, were enslaved by the Gabriel Bernoon 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.

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

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

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

**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.

**Shoemaker Family**
When Jacob Shoemaker died without a will and no heirs in 1774, the six people he had enslaved became the property of his son-in-law. 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.

**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.

**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.

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

**Fibbo Brown**
Fibbo Brown was the first Black man elected to public office in Rhode Island 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.

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

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 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.

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.

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KINGST

A. POINT OF INTEREST

C. POINT OF INTEREST

North Burial Ground

The current Rhode Island State House was built on the site of Snowtown.

This address marks the home of Black Veteran Richard Cozzens

This house was the site of an ongoing legal situation. Amyntus

Market Square & Market House

The Old Brick School House

Providence Gazette 21 Meeting Street

The house, also called "Shakespeare's Head," housed John Carter and his

Cathedral of St. John & Burial Ground

This cathedral, originally built as King's Church in 1732, was founded in

During the late 1820s, King Street's population became more diverse,

This house was the site of an ongoing legal situation. Amyntus

B. POINT OF INTEREST

Mount Hope Shaking Garden

Mount Hope Shaking Garden is a community garden near the historically

Snowtown

The current Rhode Island State House was built on the site of Snowtown. 

亥he 1824 Hardwood Riot, a white mob destroyed 20 Black-owned homes and businesses, ten years later, during the 1831奴隶战争. The riot was another white mob terrorized Black neighborhoods for four days, resulting in the death of five people. The damage and destruction of 18 buildings, and the ultimate intervention of the Rhode Island state militia.

The Old Brick School House 24 Meeting Street

Unequal access to education has been an ongoing issue since the founding of America. Although the struggle crosses racial and ethnic lines, enslaved and free Black people found additional racial legal and systemic challenges that created inequity. Thanks to years of advocacy, Providence began to build schools for all ages; one specifically for free Blacks opened in 1863. This circa 1879 building housed a piece of that story. The "Colored" School was a separate school for students of color beginning in 1822. Eventually, attendance declined and Providence schools were integrated.

Providence Gazette 21 Meeting Street

The house, also called "Shakespeare's Head," housed John Carter and his

Providence Gazette 21 Meeting Street

It's a place to consider the role of media in upholding slavery.

The Old Brick School House 24 Meeting Street

Joseph Brown House 60 South Main Street

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

The Old Brick School House 24 Meeting Street

This house was the site of an ongoing legal situation. Amyntus

Welcome Arnold House 21 Point Street

This house was the site of an ongoing legal situation. Amyntus

The Providence Refuge for Colored Children 21 Point Street

Originally located at this spot on Wickenden Street, the shelter was founded by white Quaker women in 1834 as a house set up to care for and assimilate children of color who were orphaned and/or in need.

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Providence Shelter for Colored Children 21 Point Street

Originally located at this spot on Wickenden Street, the shelter was founded by white Quaker women in 1834 as a house set up to care for and assimilate children of color who were orphaned and/or in need. After a fire in 1867, the shelter was moved to 21 Close Street. The shelter has transformed into a foundation that supports organizations serving Black children to this day.

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Stephen Hopkins House

Ten years Governor of Rhode Island, Stephen Hopkins enslaved at least as many people in this house.

Esek Hopkins House

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

Esek Hopkins House

Esek Hopkins House

Sally Gallery at John Brown House 52 House Square

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

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