

Three Hundred and Fifty Years of Black Presence in Boston:

“Building Traditions”

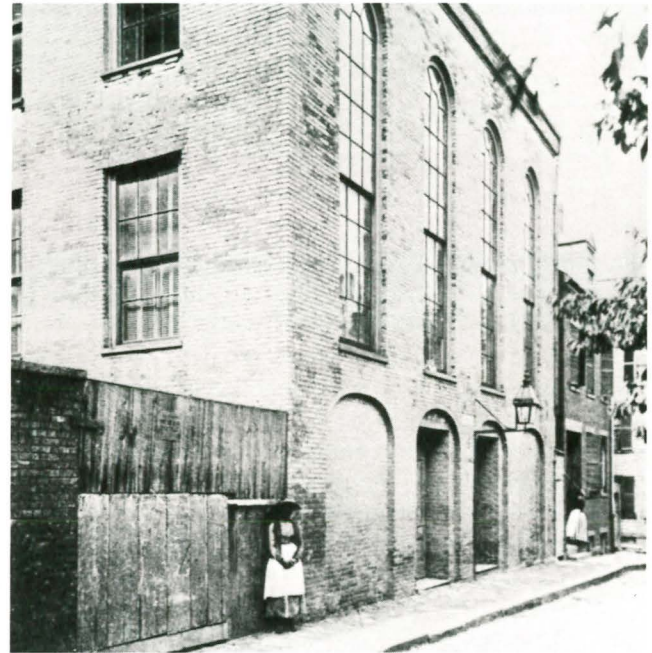
by Betty Hillmon and Edmund B. Gaither

The first groups of Africans to reach the Bay Colony in 1638 were designated “perpetual servants.” By 1715, the new African arrivals were being called “slaves,” as the Bay Colony took an active part in the slave trade. The numbers of all Blacks in Boston remained small in the Colonial era, comprising only ten percent of the population in 1752, but members of their ranks were to establish traditions that have continued in Boston’s Black communities for 350 years.

In 1770 Crispus Attucks became “the first to defy, the first to die” in the Boston Massacre. Later Black men, such as Peter Salem (?-1816), Brazillai Lew (1743-1793), Lemuel Hayes (1753-1833) and Prince Hall (1735-1807), followed Attucks’s rebellious act by serving as soldiers in the Revolutionary War. In the same decade, Phillis Wheatley, bought from a slave ship in 1761, made her place as the first Black American formalist poet. In 1770 she published the very popular poem, “On the Death of the Reverend George Whitefield”; another of her works, “To S.M., A Young African Painter,” provided important information on Black artists in directing attention to Scipio Moorhead, one of the earliest Black painters.

The activities of these colonial Blacks mark the beginning of two important and impressive Black traditions in Massachusetts – protest and the struggle for justice and the definition of Black presence through folk and cultural arts. These traditions began to flourish in the first half of the 19th century as the Black population of Boston increased in size and diversity. From the South came streams of slaves escaping via the Underground Railroad, to be followed later by freedmen looking for greater opportunities in education and a better quality of life. West Indians – some immigrants, some slaves – added their dialects, accents and views of life to that of southerners and Black Boston Yankees. Africans, Irish-born Blacks and British and Canadian Blacks were also part of the growing Black presence in Boston, which numbered 1,875 people in 1830, growing to 2,261 in 1860. This community was located on Beacon Hill within the shadow of the Massachusetts State House.

Black Bostonians of the 1800s increasingly recognized their common African cultural roots. This is reflected in the creation of cultural organizations and institutions as well as the names given them – African Meeting House, African Masonic Lodge, African Baptist



The African Meeting House, circa 1900. Photo courtesy the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

Church, African Society. These centers, open to all Blacks, were dedicated to the preservation of a tradition rooted in its own unique sense of history and place.

The African Meeting House (1806), the first of its type in America, was a gathering place where issues such as the abolition of slavery were debated, where escaped slaves told their stories and where people came for entertainment. The Meeting House was also a place for social events, schooling and the home of the first Black church in Boston, the African Baptist Church. A remarkable series of orators, anti-slavery advocates and writers spoke here, such as David Walker, William W. Brown and Frederick Douglass. These orators stirred within free Blacks in Massachusetts a deep compassion for those still enslaved, while reminding them that liberty requires constant struggle. The formation and performance of the famous 54th Regiment of Colored Volunteers during the Civil War evidenced the collective impact of these spokesmen.

While the importance of the church to Black Bostonians cannot be overstated, fraternal organizations

also served an important function. The African Masonic Lodge, founded by Prince Hall in 1787 and now located in Roxbury/Dorchester, was perhaps the largest and most influential. Others included the African Society, a mutual-aid organization, and the Histrionic Club, a cultural organization which presented plays acted by members of the community. In contrast to these formal institutions, Blacks gathered informally at such establishments as the local barber shop, which provided them avenues for intra-community support – political, economic, and cultural.

By the 20th century, Boston was home to Blacks with southern, Caribbean and Cape Verdean roots as well as its own Afro-American Yankees. This newly forged community, now located in the South End of Boston, offered enhanced opportunities in both the formal and folk arts: Lois Mailou Jones and Allan Rohan Crite were studying art at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts; Monroe Trotter was publishing "The Guardian," a newspaper in Roxbury; and the "Colored American Magazine" was appearing monthly. Several local companies were deeply involved with the National Negro Business League: the Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded by Marcus Garvey, enjoyed wide influence.

Boston became a source of Black musicians and writers. Duke Ellington's band drew musicians from Boston; Billie Holiday and others frequently sang there with bands composed of local performers; William Sebastian "Sabby" Lewis had formed his own group of musicians and was drawing crowds at the Boston Savoy. Boston had also been the training ground for Georgian-born Roland Hayes, a world-famous concert singer, who took both Black spirituals and German *Lieder* to the courts of Europe. Writer William E. B. Dubois offered a new perspective on the meaning of Black history within the context of American history.

Following World War II, the city's Black population again expanded, this time with a large influx of southerners and a continuing stream from the Caribbean. The community was also rapidly leaving the South End and moving into Roxbury/North Dorchester, the present site of the community. Folk arts took on great importance for the new arrivals. Cultural traditions usually observed in private homes now became activities celebrated by large groups organized under such names as the West Indian Benevolent Society, the Haitian Social Club, or the South Carolina Club. The new immigrants were not as satisfied to replace their unique traditions with those of America, choosing instead to change the face of the Black neighborhood. Food markets, small and large, now sold ingredients for the preparation of traditional West Indian dishes. Jamaicans bought fresh goat's meat for the preparation of curried goat. Ackee (a tropical vegetable) was available for the preparation of ackee and salted fish. Southerners bought chitterlings, hog-maws and pig's feet.

Festivals gained in importance among the West Indian population. In an effort to continue their traditions, Haitians, Jamaicans and other West Indians joined Trinidadians to reproduce Carnival in the Boston streets, and every August for one day, the streets of Roxbury blaze with the colors, costumes, dance and sounds of the West Indian Carnival Parade. Mask makers compete in this festival as do the numerous steel bands of Boston, such as the Silver Stars and Metro Steel. Members of both traditions often return to their home islands to study the latest musical and artistic developments. Because of Carnival's commercialism in Trinidad, Boston's



Young visitors to the Museum at the National Center of Afro-American Artists. Photo by Rudolph Robinson

West Indian Festival may in fact remain closer to the older tradition than that in the Caribbean.

Today, Boston's Black churches continue to be the central keepers of religious musical traditions. The tradition of anthems and spirituals established by 19th century Blacks is still observed in churches like St. Marks Congregational. With the increased number of southern Blacks, gospel music has become very popular: on any Sunday, gospel choirs can be heard in such churches as 12th Baptist, Holy Tabernacle or St. John's Baptist as well as in many smaller, store-front churches.

As Boston's Black community celebrates its three hundred and fiftieth anniversary, it continues to define and support its cultural heritage in actions such as the reclamation and restoration of the African Meeting House by the Museum of Afro-American History. Newly commissioned public statues with Black cultural themes attest to the continuing efforts of Black Bostonians to celebrate their community. John Wilson's "Eternal Presence," commissioned by the National Center of Afro-American Artists, stands on the grounds of their Museum in Roxbury and symbolizes the eternal presence of Blacks, not only in Boston but in the world.

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