

# Museum of African American History, Boston and Nantucket

## The African Meeting House: A Gathering Place for Freedom

### **THE AFRICAN MEETING HOUSE: A GATHERING PLACE FOR FREEDOM**

Seeking to improve their city and community, black Bostonians developed pioneering organizations, worked to eradicate slavery, and provided support to self-liberating people. Essential to their collective effectiveness was a place to gather together. The **African Meeting House** became that gathering place in 1806.

Fifteen years after the passage of the Bill of Rights, the African Baptist Church was dedicated. Officially consecrated on December 6, 1806, the church was part of the established tradition of African American excellence and enterprise in Boston. The women, men, and children who made up the first congregation of this church established a holy sanctuary for worship and a much-desired school that would support African American education.

The red brick church would house historic abolitionist meetings, would accommodate unforgettable lectures, would resound with children's voices reciting their lessons and singing, and would host recruiting meetings for brave black Civil War regiments. All who entered into this stately building on Smith Court, found that there, the freedom of speech, guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, was upheld. The church also protected freedom of the press supporting abolitionist newspapers like *The Liberator* and Freedom's Journal. The church enabled people of all races to assemble in peace. The **African Meeting House** was a mighty gathering place for freedom.

### **Founding the African Baptist Society and Building the African Meeting House**

The African Baptist Church was officially organized on August 8, 1805 with twenty-two members: Scipio Dalton, Abraham Fairfield, James Broomfield, Charles Bailey, Richard Winslow, John Bassett, Obediah Robbins and fifteen women whose names were unrecorded. The Reverend Thomas Paul of New Hampshire was the first minister of the African Baptist Church.

Over the next year, the congregation raised money and built its own edifice on May Court (now Smith Court) off Belknap Street (now Joy Street). The church elicited great enthusiasm from many in and beyond the Beacon Hill community. Fundraising was impressive and donations came from African American and white individuals. Cato Gardner, a native African, was one of the individuals most well known for his early contributions to the building. Gardner successfully collected \$1,500 for the building fund.

Some black Bostonians were skilled craftsmen who joined the church construction as bricklayers, carpenters, "master builders," and masons. Master mason Abel Barbadoes and the master builder and boat builder Boston Smith led the construction effort.

The **African Meeting House** was a three-story brick building designed with three distinct spaces within its walls: a church, a school room, and an apartment. While the church and the apartment were ready for use in 1806, the school room was not occupied until 1808. Both the sanctuary and the school room were used for multiple purposes, such as worship, education, community meetings, celebrations, lectures, and concerts.

### **THE AFRICAN MEETING HOUSE: A GATHERING PLACE FOR ABOLITION AND ACTIVISM**

Black Bostonians were ardent about equality and justice. Their commitment to democracy, their belief in fairness, and their collective desire to succeed in America enabled them to be some of the world's most effective abolitionists. After worshipping God, the next most holy cause was the abolition of slavery. Black Bostonians did not only regard abolition as a civic duty, they also embraced such activist work as an explicit dimension of their faith.

Abolitionist activity was entirely diverse. The Underground Railroad network often led self-emancipated individuals to the **African Meeting House**. They then were shown to safe houses on Beacon Hill and provided aid in the form of food, clothing and shelter. In this church, individuals organized fundraisers and political rallies. They assembled to discuss petitions to state and national governments that addressed their interests as free people of color and on behalf of their enslaved brethren. They created

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and supported antislavery publications, attended lectures and celebrated the accomplishments of fearless abolitionists who, despite significant threats, devoted themselves to the cause. The **African Meeting House**, known widely as the “Black Faneuil Hall,” became the destination where abolitionists and all those concerned about freedom and bondage in and beyond America could meet, debate, and exhort each other. African Baptist Church members benefited enormously from their full access to the **African Meeting House**. Its meeting rooms were precious resources for idealistic and patriotic members.

### Abolitionist Organizations

In 1826, the Massachusetts General Colored Association (MGCA) was founded by leaders like Thomas Dalton, William Guion Nell, and John T. Hilton, who also served as church clerk. These men collaborated with other black Bostonians to establish the state's first antislavery society. In 1828, in a rousing address at meeting of the MGCA, David Walker stated that “the primary object of this institution, is, to unite the colored population, so far, through the United States of America, as may be practicable and expedient; forming societies, opening, extending, and keeping up correspondences, and not withholding any thing which may have the least tendency to meliorate our miserable condition.” On May 6, 1831, the members of the Massachusetts General Colored Association met in the **African Meeting House** to nominate their officers for the coming year.

### New England Anti-Slavery Society

In December 1832, the New England Anti-Slavery Society was founded at the **African Meeting House**, witnessed by prominent black community members. That historic event forged a most powerful connection between white and African American abolitionists. The Massachusetts General Colored Association, which predated the NEASS by some six years, modeled for the predominantly white group how successful antislavery organizations could and should work. This kind of bold multi-racial endeavor reinforced for many African Americans the idea that in the United States a steady march towards freedom was happening.

### Meetings and Lectures

Members of the church and abolitionist supporters from their extended national and international communities welcomed the opportunity to deliver lectures from the pulpit of the African Baptist Church. Throughout the antebellum era distinguished abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison came to the **Meeting House** to deliver stirring lectures to the African American citizens of Boston and the vicinity. The abolitionists inspired and renewed the antislavery commitments of their **African Meeting House** listeners.

The church accommodated a range of events relating to equal rights and citizenship, as well as meetings about and against colonization and emigration. African American women flourished in this sanctified sphere. They began impressive careers as activists and emerged as respected community leaders and laid a sure foundation for all American women.

### Underground Railroad and Fugitive Slave Law

The Underground Railroad, the informal network of black and white abolitionists facilitating the movement of self-emancipated people from southern bondage to northern freedom, operated in Boston throughout the pre-Civil War years. Dedicated individuals and industrious organizations housed, clothed, fed, found jobs, and paid the transportation expenses of self-emancipated men, women, and families who arrived in Boston either to live or to continue on to destinations further north.

The African Baptist Church at the **African Meeting House** weathered dissension and intense distractions during its history. Some of the obstacles that emerged were linked directly to slavery. The church was not immune to trespass and invasion by Southern slave traders who were hired to find or kidnap people suspected of being self-emancipated. They infiltrated church services and their very presence amounted to harassment since many members were active leaders in the Underground Railroad. The historic Underground Railroad network helped to relocate thousands of enslaved people to freedom and it offered ongoing and vital assistance to formerly enslaved people and families.

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### THE AFRICAN MEETING HOUSE: A GATHERING PLACE FOR BLACK REGIMENTS

The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861 when Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter. Many African Americans were eager to join the Union so that they could fight for their families, their nation, and end slavery in America. Despite their willingness to enlist, aspiring soldiers of color confronted prejudice and legislative obstructions that blocked their full participation. Many were frustrated that African American men were being denied the right to bear arms, especially since the race had an impressive history of valor, patriotism, and military service in all American wars.

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This document granted freedom to enslaved individuals living in Confederate territories. Later Secretary of War Stanton approved African American enlistment in the Union Army. Blacks throughout the North and the mid-West immediately began to register to fight and the **African Meeting House** became a recruitment center.

By February 21, 1863, scores of men were undergoing training at Camp Meigs in Readville, Massachusetts, now Hyde Park in Boston. The regiments in training soon included over 1,000 men. The enthusiastic response led to the creation not only of the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Infantry Regiment but also of the 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment and the 5<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry. (209)

### THE AFRICAN MEETING HOUSE: A GATHERING PLACE FOR CELEBRATIONS

Black Bostonians had a keen awareness of history and recognized the importance of commemorating landmark dates and significant achievements. They honored each other and the women and men whose efforts they respected. The **African Meeting House** was the site of some of the most legendary celebrations.

These gatherings often marked milestones in the effort to abolish slavery in and beyond the United States. First of August celebrations, which marked the day England abolished slavery in the West Indies was a highpoint of the summer. On one occasion, a soiree in the Infant School Room of the church was followed by a procession through downtown Boston to the Chardon Street Chapel for services. On other occasions, services continued at other well-known Boston sites such as Tremont Temple.

#### Abolition Celebrations

Many Bostonians participated in services at the **African Meeting House** and in other city locations to remember those, all over the world who had been victimized by slavery. Newspapers for many decades consistently carried announcements about programs and events to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade by the United States, Great Britain, and Denmark. All Bostonians were welcome to attend the services. Collections were taken on these occasions and the proceeds were directed to important causes. Several Boston newspapers reported on the Abolition of the African Slave Trade Celebration in the **African Meeting House**. On August 1, 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act ended slavery in the British colonies in the West Indies. In this letter William S. Jinning describes the 1839 West Indian Emancipation celebration in Boston which included exercises at the **African Meeting House**.

#### Anniversaries and Tributes

Black Bostonians created events that required formal celebration. Throughout the 1800s, they organized welcome dinners, farewell celebrations, and tributes to tireless advocates for the abolition of slavery. Boston was indeed a special city from which individuals could undertake and embark on noble missions and be distinguished and recognized as beloved colleagues. The **African Meeting House** figured prominently in the noteworthy celebrations that confirmed the commitment of the Beacon Hill community to justice and equality. Black Bostonians often made significant financial donations in order to commission valuable gifts for the guests of honor.

African American organizations were very deliberate about their formation, mission, and activities. They often established charters, wrote constitutions, and enacted regular calendars of events for members and for the community. Each year, the societies held anniversary celebrations. These celebratory events provided all Bostonians with invaluable opportunities to witness the substantial network of formal artistic, social, political, and educational societies in the African American community. A number of organizations,

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especially those that incorporated the name "African" into their titles, celebrated African American achievement and underscored the advances that they and their members were making.

The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, founded in 1832, took time on the anniversary of its creation to acknowledge its history and potential. Groups for young men, like the Adelpic Union for the Promotion of Literature and Science, the Young Men's Literary Society, the Boston Young Men's Debating Society, and the Thompson Literary and Debating Society, organized anniversary celebrations. The cherished anniversary gatherings of the Garrison Juvenile Society, named after the legendary *Liberator* editor, inspired audiences with spirited songs, and cultivated the rich musical talents of Boston children. These annual gatherings marked the endurance of these organizations and publicized the diverse interests and talents of their members.

In October 1828, Prince Abdul Rahhman was feted at the **African Meeting House** and the Masonic Temple. The event, which featured a speech by the eloquent and fearless abolitionist David Walker, was held in honor of the African prince from Futa Jallon, who after being sold into slavery and traded by British slave traders, ultimately was transported to Natchez, Mississippi. Deep in the American South, he worked and lived for some forty years before he regained his freedom. Immediately after obtaining his freedom again, the prince began a fundraising tour that brought him North. His visit to Boston was part of the lengthy tour sponsored by the American Colonization Society as they sought to promote, through the Prince, the relocation to Africa of all people of African descent.

On May 3, 1847 at the **African Meeting House**, Frederick Douglass was welcomed home after two years on the abolitionist lecture circuit in England. His British friends had purchased his freedom from Hugh Auld for \$711.66. William C. Nell was President of the celebration, Robert Morris and Jonas W. Clark, Vice Presidents. Nell reported in *The Liberator* that William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips conducted Douglass to the pulpit. During the evening Douglass, Garrison, Phillips, and Henry Bibb spoke. Isaac Snowden introduced resolutions of welcome. The celebration continued until 11:30 p.m., when "the crowded assembly adjourned, after uniting in three welcome shouts for Frederick Douglass."

In 1853, the black community honored Cassius M. Clay, the white Kentucky statesman from a slaveholding family. He defied family tradition and local custom when he freed all his slaves. His long and varied career included editing an abolitionist newspaper in Lexington, Kentucky; serving as a captain in the Mexican War; running unsuccessfully for governor of Kentucky as an antislavery candidate; and serving as a United States minister to Russia. On hand at this historic moment was Lewis Hayden, the man who endured the sale of his wife and child by Clay's cousin, the avowed slaveholder and U.S. Senator, Henry Clay. When black Boston welcomed Cassius Clay at the **African Meeting House**, Hayden was president of the celebration and reminisced with Clay about their earlier interactions in Kentucky.

### **THE AFRICAN MEETING HOUSE: A GATHERING PLACE FOR ORGANIZATIONS**

Boston's African American community always included ingenious, ambitious, and creative people. They balanced demanding work and labor with activities that accommodated their interests in the arts, history, uplift, advocacy, debate, temperance, and education. They created a vast array of organizations and used them to empower each other and the larger community and to create opportunities for pleasurable companionship. They were also committed to the wellbeing of Boston's African American community and dedicated themselves to protecting the welfare of families as well as needy children, self-emancipated people, and the poor. Many church members served in these organizations which often met in the **African Meeting House**. These societies were strengthened by spiritual faith, and meetings often began and ended with formal prayers.

Many community members honed their skills at debate, book-keeping, outreach, publicity, and printing because of their involvement in Boston's bustling societies. Members always maintained a high set of expectations for etiquette, appearance, and behavior and women and men worked and learned alongside each other.

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Examples of these organizations include the Boston Mutual Lyceum, the New England Freedom Association, the Paul Humane Society and the African Society for Mutual Aid and Charity, the pioneering African American aid organization in Boston founded in 1796.

### Network of Community Leadership

In antebellum black Boston men and women often served as leaders for multiple organizations. Leaders presided at meetings, served as officers, contributed to discussions, and raised funds to support activities for more than one organization. The members of black Boston who presided at organizational gatherings held in the **African Meeting House** were primarily small business owners in service industries—barbers, seamstresses, clothes dealers, waiters, bootblacks. More often than not, an individual was a leader in multiple community organizations dedicated to different purposes. This overlapping leadership pattern created a network of community leadership that gave stability and strength to black Boston.

Item: Temperance Meeting

The **African Meeting House** accommodated societies that focused on social welfare and health interests, including temperance organizations for those who abstained from all alcohol and were willing to take "the cold-water pledge." On April 10, 1833 the Boston Colored Male Temperance Society and the Women's Temperance Society were formed in the **African Meeting House**.

Frederick Douglass, the great self-liberated African American orator, abolitionist, and statesman, often participated in events at the **African Meeting House** when he was in Boston. On December 22, 1862 he gave a lecture for the Boston Fugitive Aid Society to aid "the suffering Freedmen of Washington, D.C."

### Juvenile Choir

Miss Susan Paul, the daughter of Reverend Thomas Paul, was a public school teacher in Boston, an abolitionist, and an author. In 1833 she organized a Juvenile Choir which performed at New England Anti-Slavery Society meetings, at the **African Meeting House**, and in Boston music halls. The choir's concerts included songs against slavery in the South and against prejudice in the North. Miss Paul also used the words of these songs for spelling and memorization exercises in her classroom.

## **THE AFRICAN MEETING HOUSE: A GATHERING PLACE FOR EDUCATION**

Education was one of the most intense priorities for black Bostonians. Motivated women, men, and children established innovative and successful schools and learning opportunities for themselves in Boston. Small well-attended private schools were created in the homes of accomplished members of the community. In 1787, a private school opened with the Reverend George Marrant, a chaplain of the African Lodge, as the primary teacher. The Reverend and Mrs. Thomas Paul's residence housed an extremely successful school where Mrs. Catherine Paul was the teacher.

Community leaders like Colonel George Middleton, famed Revolutionary War hero and commander of the Bucks of America, and Prince Hall, a leather dresser and founder of the African Lodge, the nation's first black Masonic Order, petitioned the legislature for public education for black children. When these petitions went unanswered, Prince Hall emboldened the community with his request, to "lay aside their superfluities" to start a school for black children. Sixty-six black Bostonians founded the African School on Beacon Hill in the home of his son, Primus Hall with Elisha Sylvester, a white Harvard graduate, as the primary instructor. The African School moved several times and in 1808 was established at **the African Meeting House**. The **Meeting House** was built with the deliberate stipulation that it include a school room.

Students of all ages were welcomed to the school. While the school room for the African School was the site of children's educational activities during the day, in the evening it housed various community educational programs for men and women. Women, men, and children endeavored to acquire education and instruction in topics such as penmanship, algebra, and chemistry. These areas became a veritable hive of activity as soon as they opened.