Portland Freedom Trail

Part of the network of Maine Freedom Trails

Self Guided Walking Tour

“Dedicated to the countless thousands of men and women who fled the bonds of slavery but were recaptured or died at the hands of their pursuers before they reached the safe embrace of the Underground Railroad. They are not forgotten.”

The Portland Freedom Trail offers sincere thanks for the leadership and financial contributions of the following supporters:

- City of Portland
- Davis Family Foundation
- Lisa and Leon Gorman
- Maine Humanities Council
- NAACP Portland Branch
- State of Maine
- Thomas Family
- United Way of Greater Portland

Art and design by Daniel Minter
American men providing the best paying jobs available as stevedores, long-shore men, and sailors. Before 1860, up to 30% of the U.S. maritime forces were comprised of African American men. Compared to their white counterparts, black men were generally older, more reliable, stable family men who were the pillars of their communities and often deeply committed to the temperance movement.

When he arrived in Portland, Captain Smith consulted Samuel Waterhouse, a clothing dealer on Fore Street. Samuel Waterhouse along with Daniel Fessenden, Edward P. Banks, Samuel A. Whittier, and Charles H.L. Pierre arranged for a small mob of anti-slavery supporters and African American men to board the ship under the cover of night to rescue the runaway.

They took him to the "head of Hancock Street" concealing him until the next morning when he could be sent to Canada.

The boats running between Portland and the Canadian provinces were made use of to help runaways to their freedom, especially as they were often provided with boat tickets. Sailing vessels were also able to furnish free passage and carried the majority of the passengers that went from Portland.

The shipping industry served as a primary employer of African Americans and provided the best paying jobs available as stevedores, long-shore men, and sailors. Before 1860, up to 30% of the U.S. maritime forces were comprised of African American men. Compared to their white counterparts, black men were generally older, more reliable, stable family men who were the pillars of their communities and often deeply committed to the temperance movement.

Triangular Trade and the Maine Connection

The economic forces that kept the institution of slavery alive were based on the triangular trade. Africans were captured, enslaved and transported through the Middle Passage, the route taken from Africa to the New World - North America, South America and the Caribbean. Slaves worked on plantations to refine sugar into molasses which was shipped to New England and distilled into rum. The rum was sent to Africa and traded for slaves. The hub for the triangular trade was Newport, Rhode Island.

In the early 19th century, Americans consumed more rum than they do today. It was common to have rum with breakfast and to have open barrels of rum in stores as a way to entice customers. Many referred to rum as "New England tea."

Salted cod was a cheap food source that kept well in the warmer climates of Cuba, South America and the Caribbean. Maine ship owners supplied salted cod to feed the slaves in exchange for barrels of molasses. Ship captains would sell the molasses to one of Portland's seven rum distilleries.

The Abyssinian Church

The Abyssinian Church located at 73-75 Newbury Street served as the major hub of the Underground Railroad in Maine and became the social center for Portland's African American community. Reuben Ruby, the foremost African American anti-slavery activist and Underground Railroad conductor in Portland, purchased the land for the church and the funds for the building came from the black community. When it was built in 1829, it became the first black congregation in Maine. In 1841, the pace of the anti-slavery movement increased in Maine with the arrival of Reverend Amos N. Freeman who became the first full-time minister of the church. He served for ten years and became the most well-known African American in the State. He was an inspirational leader who promoted education – serving as principal of the school sponsored by the Abyssinian - employment, temperance, and offered many fugitive slaves refuge at both the church and his home. The Abyssinian was one of the few buildings to survive the Great Fire of 1866 as a result of firefighter William Wilberforce Ruby, son of Reuben Ruby, wetting it down. The church is currently the third oldest African American church still standing in the United States and in the process of being restored.
Driver's were active members of the Abyssinian Religious Society. Christopher Christian Manuel (1781-1843), an immigrant from Cape Verde, Africa, was the first elected president of the Portland Union Anti-Slavery Society. Until November 2006, he lied buried in an unmarked grave next to his wife Sophia Ruby Manuel (1802-1875). Sophia was the sister of Reuben Ruby, one of the foremost African American anti-slavery leaders in Portland.

Jannett C. Pear Ruby (1805-1827) was the first wife of Reuben Ruby. She is buried next to their infant son William Ruby and Sophia Ruby Manuel. Reuben Ruby's final resting place is at the Forest City Cemetery in South Portland.

6. Eastern Cemetery
This historic nine acre burial ground is the resting place of some of Portland's noted abolitionists who campaigned against slavery, provided safe-houses and assisted runaways on their journey to freedom.

Elizabeth Widgery Thomas (1779-1861), her husband Elias Thomas (1772-1872) and their daughter Charlotte Thomas (1822-1920) were among the most prominent members of the Portland Anti-Slavery Society thought to be formed as early as 1833. The society, based on the ideology of William Lloyd Garrison, not only worked to abolish slavery but also advanced the question of women's rights. Many of the local and national leaders in the women's rights movement got their start in political organizing and action through participation in the anti-slavery movement. The obituary of Mrs. Elias Thomas was prominently featured in the July 12, 1861 edition of the Liberator, William Lloyd Garrison's weekly abolition newspaper published in Boston. George Ropes (1809-1842) and his brothers David and Joseph were African American conductors on the Underground Railroad and activists in the anti-slavery movement. The three brothers ran a hardware and crockery store on Middle Street. George lived on the corner of Elm and Oxford Streets.

Margaret P. Driver (1769-1853) was born a slave in North Carolina. She was the wife of Blackstone Driver, the treasurer of the Portland Union Anti-Slavery Society. The Driver's were active members of the Abyssinian Religious Society. Christopher Christian Manuel (1781-1843), an immigrant from Cape Verde, Africa, was the first elected president of the Portland Union Anti-Slavery Society. Until November 2006, he lied buried in an unmarked grave next to his wife Sophia Ruby Manuel (1802-1875). Sophia was the sister of Reuben Ruby, one of the foremost African American anti-slavery leaders in Portland.

Jannett C. Pear Ruby (1805-1827) was the first wife of Reuben Ruby. She is buried next to their infant son William Ruby and Sophia Ruby Manuel. Reuben Ruby's final resting place is at the Forest City Cemetery in South Portland.

7. Home of Elias and Elizabeth Widgery Thomas
Located at 53 India Street, the Thomas home was known as a safe house for fugitive slaves. Members of the Thomas family were prominent in the Portland Anti-Slavery Society which also worked to advance women's rights. They also provided housing for notable abolitionists such as Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Lenox Remond and Parker Pillsbury. The home was destroyed by the Great Fire of 1866.

8. Home of General Samuel C. Fessenden
Samuel C. Fessenden (1784 – 1869) was an abolitionist, state legislator, lawyer and a passionate supporter of Portland's African American community. He studied law with Daniel Webster, and served in both houses of the Massachusetts State Legislature. He acted as Major General of the Massachusetts (later Maine) militia, was a United States Liberty Party candidate for Congress, a candidate for governor of Maine on the anti-slavery ticket, and an early supporter of the United States Republican Party. Considered a leader of Maine's anti-slavery movement, General Fessenden moved to Portland in 1822, and in 1828 declined the presidency of Dartmouth College. For forty years he stood at the head of the bar in Maine. He was an active philanthropist.

In 1832 General Fessenden heard William Lloyd Garrison speak at the First Parish Church and immediately switched his alliance from the American Colonization Society to becoming a staunch supporter of the Anti-Slavery Society. He "gave escaped bondmen reaching Portland a hearty welcome at his house..." His three sons, Daniel, Rev. Samuel Clement and William Pitt, who served as a U.S. representative and senator from Maine and as the U.S. Treasury Secretary, followed his example and became anti-slavery and Underground Railroad activists.

9. Friends (Quaker) Meeting House
Famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison started the Maine anti-slavery movement in the Meeting House with a speech given in 1832. Garrison advocated for “immediate emancipation without compensation” instead of colonizing freed African Americans to Liberia. Two of the first pro-slavery riots occurred here - one in 1836 and another in 1847 - when abolitionists such as Henry Brewer Stanton, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglas and Charles Lenox Remond attempted to lecture. The Meeting House was not rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1866.

10. Hack Stand of Reuben Ruby
Reuben Ruby (1798-1878) was the foremost African American anti-slavery activist and Underground Railroad conductor in Portland. He was one of the founders of the Abyssinian Church and funded its acquisition and construction. He was born in Gray, Maine. Reuben Ruby worked directly with William Lloyd Garrison and supported the start of Freedom's Journal, the first black newspaper in this country. His hack stand was located in front of the Elm Tavern where he maintained one coach. Another coach was maintained at his home "the second house on the east side of Preble Street from the head."