

# The initiative of black people transformed a war to restore the Union into a movement for liberty and citizenship for all.

In May 1861, three enslaved black men sought refuge at Union-controlled Fort Monroe, Virginia. Rather than return the fugitives to the enemy, Commanding Officer Benjamin F. Butler claimed the men as “contrabands of war” and put them to work as scouts and laborers. Soon hundreds of black men, women, and children were streaming into the Union stronghold. Congress authorized the confiscation of Confederate property, including enslaved people, and the payment of black laborers in the Union cause. Word of that policy stirred black men, women, and children throughout the South to seek freedom behind the Union lines. This mass movement ultimately forced the government to treat the “contraband” as free people and prompted President Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation at the start of 1863.

Ever since the early 1700s, people of color had been forcing whites to reckon with the slave system. In both northern and southern colonies, slave rebellions often brought savage repression, while in other instances black protests won support from sympathetic whites. In 1769 a British customs official in Boston purchased enslaved James Somerset and took him back to England. There, Somerset escaped from his “owner” and enlisted the aid of whites, who argued his cause in the courts. The Somerset Case (1772) ruled that slavery had no legal foundation in England and Wales. Somerset was thus a free man, but were he to return to the Americas, he could legally be kept in chains under local laws. News of the Somerset decision inspired enslaved people in Massachusetts to seek freedom. Between 1773 and 1775, over 25 antislavery petitions were

presented to the provincial legislature by enslaved men across greater Boston. Finally, in the early 1780s, Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman (Image 1) of Sheffield and Quock Walker of Framingham prevailed in court. Although a handful of people of color in the Bay State still remained in bondage, slavery was on its way to extinction. Massachusetts reported no slaves in the first census in 1790.

Throughout the early Republic, black abolitionists pushed the limits of white antislavery activists who advocated the colonization of people of color. In 1816, a group of whites organized the American Colonization Society (ACS) for the purpose of emancipating slaves and resettling freedmen and freedwomen in a white-run colony in West Africa. Although some black entrepreneurs initially supported the plan, most northern African Americans spurned colonization as a ruse to remove dissident blacks and tighten slavery’s grip on the nation.

In opposition to the ACS, free people of color affirmed and defended their rights to equal citizenship within the United States. In 1829 David Walker, a free black North Carolinian who relocated to Boston, wrote *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, which urged the immediate end of slavery by any means necessary. The *Appeal* advocated black education, equal employment, and community organization. Walker and his supporters formed the Massachusetts General Colored Association in 1826 to demand freedom and justice for people of African descent. The next year the nation’s first black newspaper, New York’s *Freedom’s Journal*, created strong ties among radical black abolitionists across the country. In this context of rising black activism, William Lloyd Garrison launched *The Liberator* in 1831. *The Liberator* hired black printers, welcomed black writers, and supported the early careers of such black abolitionist orators as Maria Stewart (2), Frederick Douglass (3), Harriet Tubman (4), and William Wells Brown (5).

## WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Throughout American history, people of African descent have demanded the right to define their racial identity through terms that reflect their proud and complex history. African Americans across greater Boston used the terms “African,” “colored,” and “negro” to define themselves before emancipation, while African Americans in the early 1900s used the terms “black,” “colored,” “negro,” and “Afro-American” – which later became “African American” to identify themselves and their ancestors. In our brochures, the terms “**people of color**,” “**people of African descent**,” “**black**,” and “**African American**” are used interchangeably to reflect the identities claimed by African Americans over time.

These and the terms “**enslaved**” (versus “slave”) and “**enslaver**” (versus “master” or “owner”) are used to reflect the humanity of the millions of black men, women, and children who claimed their personhood, in various ways large and small, despite the laws and systems that bound them.



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# Black Abolitionists (1700s–1800s)



## Who actually freed the slaves?

BY KERRI GREENIDGE, TUFTS UNIVERSITY

# THE ROBBINS HOUSE

CONCORD'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

By 1837, when Susan Robbins Garrison\* became a founding member of the Concord Female Antislavery Society, black abolitionists already had a long history of demanding freedom and racial justice on their own terms.

A group of free northern men of color started the Black Convention Movement to rally free African Americans around emancipation, education, and racial justice. Between 1831 and 1865, free blacks held eleven national “Conventions of Free People of Colour,” and several state and regional conventions to debate political strategy, raise money for fugitive slaves, and support black-run institutions. In 1836, a group of black abolitionist women in Boston took direct action to prevent the return of fugitives to the South, which included charging the courthouse and plucking two female escapees out of federal custody. After 1837 – until the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 – no fugitive could be returned from Massachusetts to southern bondage without a jury trial.



▲ 1872 National Convention of Colored Citizens in the House of Representatives, New Orleans. (Courtesy Library of Congress)

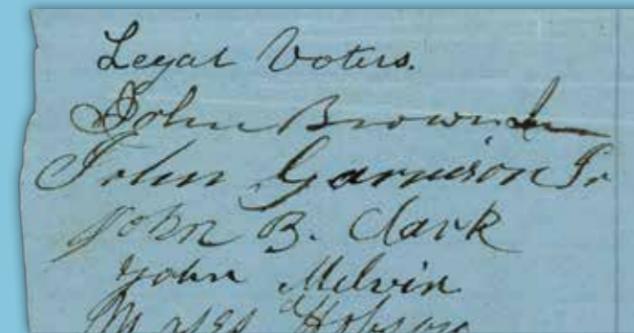
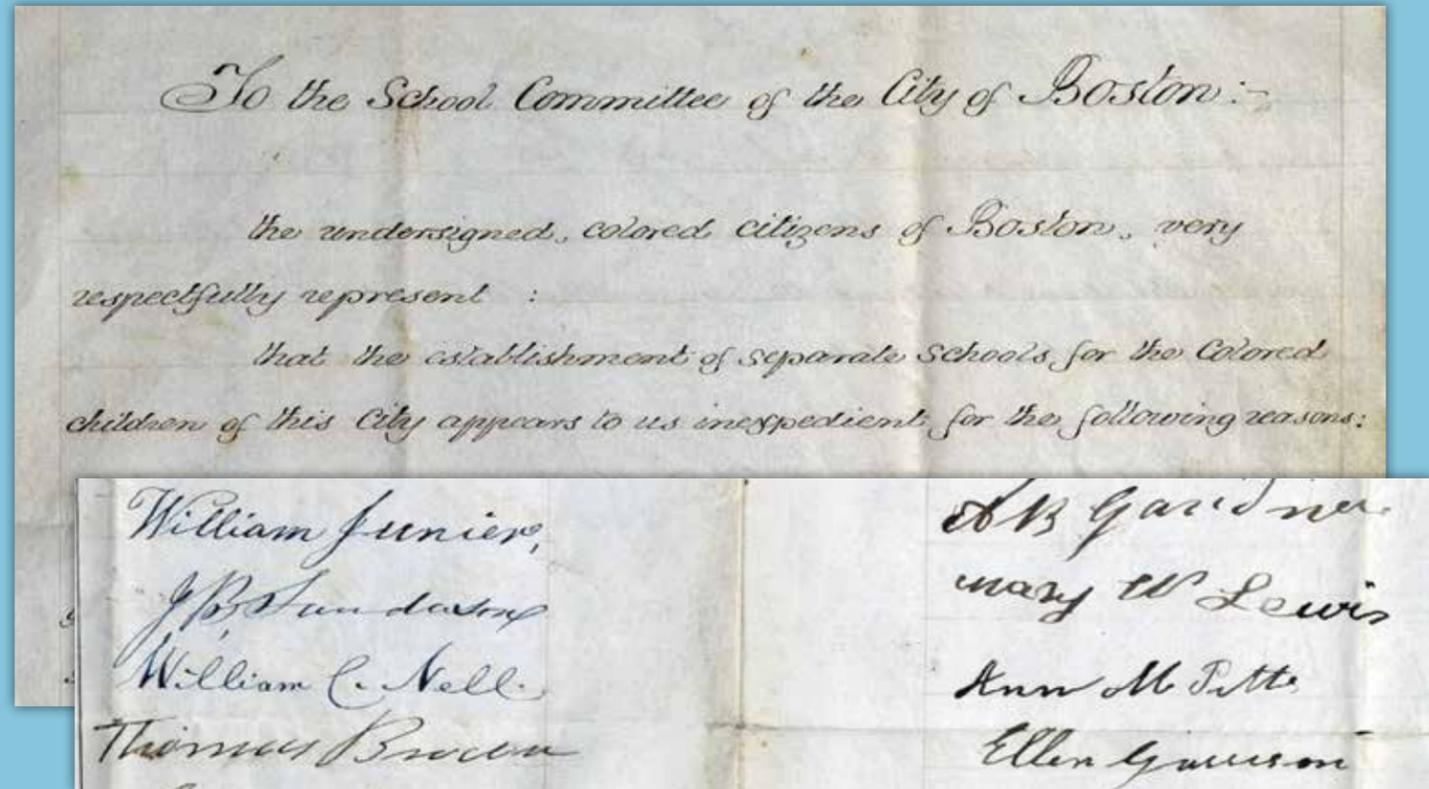
In 1850 Benjamin F. Roberts protested the exclusion of his daughter from a segregated school, and Charles Sumner partnered with Robert Morris (6), one of the nation’s first African American lawyers, to sue the city of Boston. The case reached the Massachusetts Supreme Court, which ruled against Roberts; however Roberts, again aided by Sumner, then brought the issue to the Massachusetts legislature. **Ellen Garrison** signed a petition to support this bill. In 1855 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts banned segregated schools in the state, the first such law in the United States.

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, which required northern courts, law officers, and ordinary citizens to cooperate actively in the return of fugitive slaves to the South. Black abolitionists in Boston, such as Lewis and Harriet Hayden, housed and supported many men and women in flight from slavery – including Shadrach Minkins, who was brought by Hayden to a home in Concord on his way to Canada.

In 1857, black abolitionists and their white allies created the Radical Abolition Party to “remove slavery from the national territories.” By the time southern states seceded from the Union during the winter of 1860–1861, black radical abolitionists had transformed the antislavery movement into a national fight for America’s republican ideals.



▲ A weekly four-column publication of foreign and domestic news printed every Friday, *Freedom's Journal* was founded by free African Americans John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish in 1827, New York City.



- ▲ Ellen Garrison was one of “the undersigned colored citizens of Boston” to sign the 1844 “Petition to Have the Smith School Abolished and That Their Children Be Permitted to Attend the Other Schools.” (Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books)
- ▲ 1851 Massachusetts AntiSlavery and Anti-Segregation Petition, signed by Robbins House resident John Garrison, Jr. (Massachusetts Archives)

## SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Primary sources include Concord and Boston antislavery petitions.

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## CONTENT REVIEWERS

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## COVER IMAGES

- (1) Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman (Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society);
- (2) Maria Stewart (Public Domain);
- (3) Frederick Douglass (The Rubel Collection);
- (4) Harriet Tubman (Library of Congress);
- (5) William Wells Brown (Public Domain);
- (6) Lewis Hayden (Boston African American National Historic Site)

\*NOTE: names in bold are associated with the Robbins House.