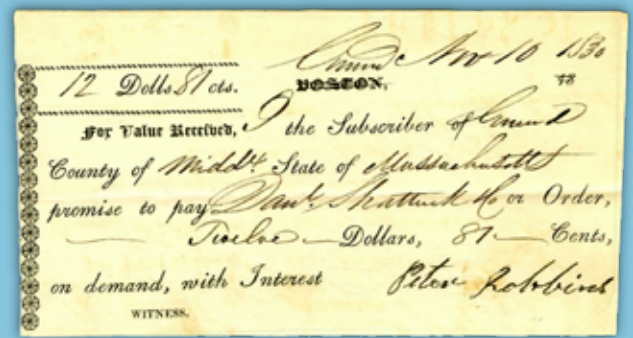


The final abolition of slavery throughout New England did not occur till the mid-1800s.

In 1823, when **Peter Robbins*** purchased over 13 acres and the newly built, two-room farmhouse in Concord, Massachusetts, free people of African descent had been a part of New England for nearly 200 years. People of color in New England were able to obtain their freedom through a variety of means: some by serving in the military, others by absconding from their enslavers and starting new lives for themselves. After the American Revolution, a few people of color successfully sued for freedom in local courts, but the impact of these cases was uncertain. State-sponsored gradual emancipation schemes offered another slow route to freedom. Meanwhile, state governments restricted the rights of the growing population of free people of color.

In the face of all of these obstacles, many formerly enslaved people defended their status as freemen by forming such independent organizations as Prince Hall's African Freemasons (1787), and Newport's Free African Society (1790). By 1800, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire were the only states to list no slaves on the United States Census.



▲ Peter Robbin's signature on a promissory note for \$12.81 to Daniel Shattuck, his creditor and one of the richest men in town, 1833. (Courtesy Massachusetts Archives)

While people of color enjoyed the same rights to trial by jury as did their white neighbors, they were barred from serving on those juries. While Massachusetts was one of the first states in the Union to mandate tax-supported, public schools in every town, black children in Boston found themselves in underfunded segregated schools. Although property-holding men in the Bay State could vote in elections, individuals of African descent often struggled to establish themselves financially and earn enough money to purchase land. Those who did so – such as **Peter Robbins** and **John Garrison, Sr.** (“**Jack**”) on Concord's Great Field – could afford only marginal land on the outskirts of rural towns. Thus, as the Robbins and Garrison families made lives for themselves in Concord during the 1830s, they enjoyed what one historian aptly referred to as “quasi-freedom.” By the 1850s, however, **John Garrison, Jr.** owned a home and three acres near Concord center.



◀ Photo taken of 91-year-old Jack Garrison when he was given a walking stick to commemorate his old age, c. 1860. (Courtesy Concord Museum)



◀ John Garrison, Jr., whose father (above) had escaped slavery in New Jersey, earned a steady salary as the Town House Superintendent and owned a house with three acres in Concord center. (Courtesy Concord Museum)

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.



Free Blacks in New England from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War (1775–1865)



How free were free people of color?

BY KERRI GREENIDGE, TUFTS UNIVERSITY AND JOHN HANNIGAN, BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

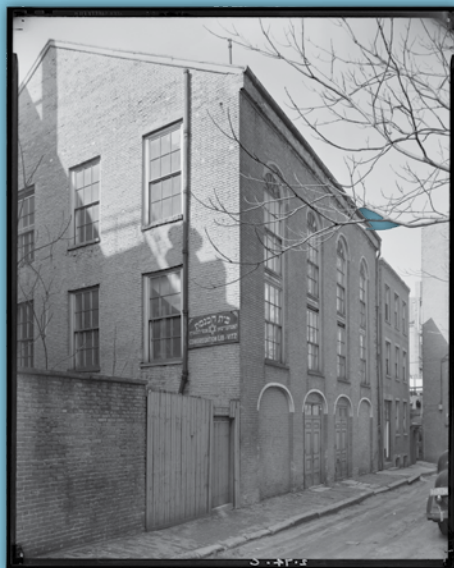
*NOTE: names in bold are associated with the Robbins House.

For free black men and women, life in 19th-century New England was one of sharp contradictions.

Nevertheless, New England's antebellum black settlements sustained independent communities where people of color established families and provided shelter to those left in poverty after slavery's end. Some were mixed race neighborhoods composed of Wampanoag, Narragansett, Pequot, and other indigenous people, poor whites, and people of African descent, including both natives of the area and fugitives from the South. Despite poverty and white hostility, these communities nurtured generations of free African Americans who, like Concord's **Ellen Garrison**, helped to shape abolitionist organizations in Boston, Salem, Providence, and New Bedford.

An expanding communications network linked rural people of color with New England's urban centers. The region's largest black community was in Boston, where free people of color contributed to the birth of the region's radical abolitionist movement. In 1806, Concord-born siblings **Susan** and **Obed Robbins** were founding members of the First African Baptist Church on Beacon Hill.

▶ **First African Baptist Church, founded on Boston's Beacon Hill in 1805-6, is the oldest black church in Massachusetts.** (Public Domain)



Baptist minister Thomas Paul was instrumental in founding the First African Baptist Church on Joy Street in 1805-6. Built almost entirely on African American donations and labor, the church was followed by dozens of black cultural societies all over New England. These organizations circulated petitions opposing segregated railroads and against laws barring interracial marriages, and promoting legal protections for fugitive slaves. By 1831, when William Lloyd Garrison first published *The Liberator*, Boston already boasted a vibrant and healthy black activist movement. Indeed, it was from a Boston print shop that black abolitionist David Walker issued his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, a radical pamphlet urging northern free people of color to stand with their brothers and sisters in the South in the fight to end slavery, even as human bondage expanded throughout the early Republic.

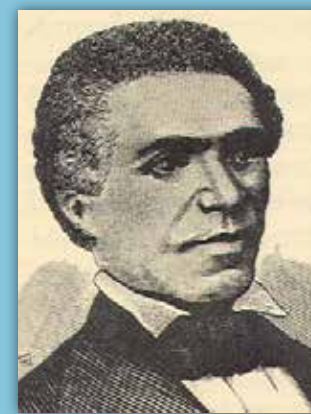
Elsewhere in the New England countryside, African-descended people formed connections with organizations in Boston, Hartford, New Haven, and Salem. A black man from Maine, John Brown Russwurm, taught in Boston's First African Baptist Church, after cofounding the country's first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in Manhattan in 1827. New Hampshire's Paul family opened churches in upstate New York, while the mixed-race Easton family of Stoughton, Massachusetts, supported industrial training



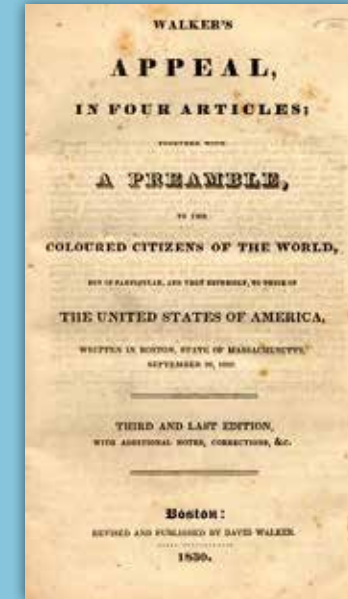
▲ **Thomas Paul was the first spiritual leader of Boston's black community, establishing the First African Baptist Church with 20 followers.**

schools for free black men in Connecticut. **Susan Robbins Garrison**, then, was one of many New Englanders of color to shape abolitionism when she hosted the second meeting of the Concord Female Antislavery Society in 1837.

Numbering fewer than 24,000 by 1860, New England's African American activists, from Salem to Newport, played an influential part in the national crusade against slavery. They were the first to subscribe to white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* and the first to rescue the editor from a pro-slavery lynch mob in Boston. In 1849 they sought out future Senator Charles Sumner to launch a legal challenge to Boston's segregated schools. Through these efforts Massachusetts became the first state in the Union to eliminate a legal ban on interracial marriage (1843), to prohibit racial segregation in public schools (1855), and to grant blacks the right to serve on juries (1860). In 1863, when the Lincoln administration authorized the enlistment of African Americans into the Union Army, New England's free people of color were among the first to volunteer. They played a key role in transforming the Civil War into a struggle for citizenship, freedom, and equality for all. By 1865, when the 13th Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery and involuntary servitude, free people of color in Concord and beyond provided an example of freedom's possibilities for the Republic as a whole.



▶ **In 1827, John Brown Russwurm cofounded the first African American owned and operated newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in New York.** (Public Domain)



▶ **African American abolitionist David Walker published his appeal for racial equality and black unity in 1829, in Boston.** (Public Domain)

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Primary sources include Concord deeds, censuses, town and vital records, and more.

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