UNDERCOVER HISTORY

Boston's Beacon Hill conceals roots of abolitionist activity

By PAGE HURLEY SHUGRUE

BOSTON–Hidden behind the quaint, Federal rowhouses of Beacon Hill lies the secret of the Abolitionist Movement. It was here that a young country's democratic ideals were shaken to their very foundation.

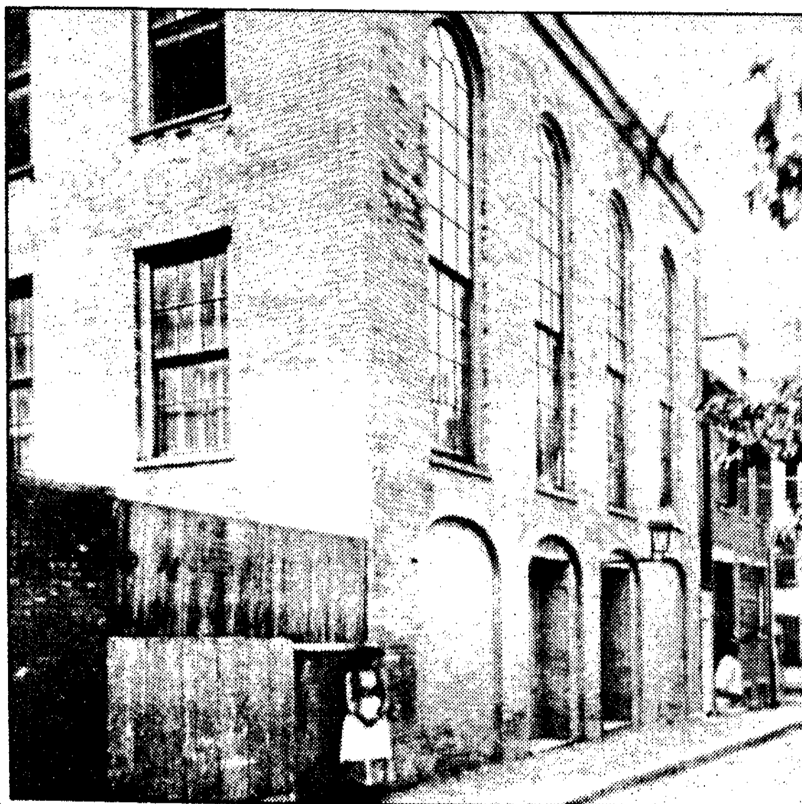
Within a few humble blocks on the Hill's North Slope are Civil War landmarks which tell another story of the nation's bloodiest siege. Charles Sumner, Massachusetts senator and ardent abolitionist, was born at the top of Irving Street, a potpourri of tenements and townhouses. On tree-lined Smith Court two blocks away stands the African Meeting House which is one of America's oldest churches and was a powerful forum for speakers like Frederick Douglass and Wliiam Lloyd Garrison.

In and around the same city streets, free and educated blacks lived well as artisans, craftspeople, entrepreneurs, homeowners and physicians, while their enslaved brothers and sisters scurried in tunnels below. The network of passages became the cogs of Boston's Underground Railroad.

The North Slope of Beacon Hill was, however, no afterthought in the Civil War saga. Its proximity to Boston Harbor traditionally attracted an eclectic mix of residents for two centuries, from recently-arrived immigrants to the well-established merchant class. Sailors often roamed the harbor searching for saloons and flophouses. Within this small, boisterous, urban landscape some African Americans found a home.

Many black residents were distinguished citizens and patriots. George Middleton, coachman and Revolutionary War veteran, lived at 5-7 Pinckney St. on the upper part of Beacon Hill. In 1780, he built the gray, clapboard structure, which became the oldest African-American home on the Hill.

Lewis Hayden, former slave and community activist, owned a federal brick townhouse on 66 Phillips St., which became the very symbol of his people's struggle for freedom. From this same doorstep, Hayden shouted down slave-catchers and threatened to blow up his own home with dynamite. Hayden also hosted anti-slavery zealot John Brown and writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, all while running the Underground Railroad, rescuing imprisoned blacks and recruiting soldiers for the 54th Massachusetts Regiment.



The First Independent Baptist Church, ca. 1892, served as the African Meeting House

Further along Phillips Street, at number 2, clothier-turned-gambler John Coburn, built his 1843 brick townhouse designed by Asher Benjamin, a Charles Bulfinch protege. As Coburn entertained Boston's finest politicians and civic leaders in his neighborhood gaming house, he actively participated in the Abolitionist cause.

Other illustrious neighbors included William Nell of Bridge Street, now Government Center, who was America's first published black writer and eloquent proponent of school integration. John Rock, who was the first black to argue before the Supreme Court, practiced law, dentistry, and medicine at 83 Phillips St.

The Abolitionist Movement also affected white residents, often the children of Revolutionary patriots, who advocated their own brand of democracy. Former mayor and avowed Southern sympathizer Harrison Gray Otis adamantly opposed ending slavery. Otis, in his elegant Cambridge Street home at the North Slope's base, worried about blatant collaboration between Abolitionists and British, who had long since outlawed slavery.

On the other hand, Charles Sumner born here in 1811 actively pursued slavery's demise. He helped formed a new political party in 1848 called the Free Soilers which fought discrimination in marriage laws, transportation and public schools. In the next year, Sumner legally defended a black child's right to attend the Boston Public Schools. This landmark case later became the foundation for the 1954 Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education.

Other white residents made their contributions to the cause less flamboyantly, but not less significantly. For example, Henry Bowditch of 8 Otis Place founded the Defense League of Freedom to protect fugitive slaves, criminalized and endangered by the Compromise of 1850. Signed by Millard Fillmore, the federal law denied runaways the right to a trial by jury, which defied a fundamental American belief and returned slaves to bondage. This odious law fired the Abolitionist debate more, stoking the wrath between North and South, while incensing the conscious-stricken American public.

Mrs. George Hilliard of 62 Pinckney St., another neighbor, hid slaves in the attic as her U.S. Commissioner husband issued warrants for their arrest. At the same address was an entrance to one of many undergound tunnels.

Throughout the North Slope, these subterranean passages afforded slaves safe travel. But their very existence is relatively undocumented. Recounted by elderly residents who remember playing there as children, these tunnels are part of the area's oral history according to the National Park Service's Ken Heidelberg. Other entrances were spotted adjacent to the all-black Abiel Smith School at 47 Joy St.; close to the former police station on 78 Joy St.; and several blocks away at 66 Phillips St., home of Lewis Hayden.

Like its residents, Beacon Hill's buildings performed a variety of functions during this period. The Suffolk County Courthouse, which overlooks downtown Boston, became a makeshift prison where abolitionists staged daring resue attempts. Benjamin Quarles in "Black Abolitionists" said the courthouse was a "gloomy, grantite building," with bars on the windows and iron encircling the perimeter, only to reinforce its menacing appearances.

The call for change had already begun here as early as 1832. William Lloyd Garrison, around the block at Park Street church, gave a rousing anti-slavery address to the congregation. The Rev. Charles Lowell, father of poet James Russell Lowell, preached against the evils of slavery, over the hill at the Old West Church. Black abolitionist Timothy Gilbert ultimately challenged church hypocrisy the most by refusing the segregated pew at Charles Street Meeting House near Mount Vernon Street.

In fact, several Baptist and Methodist groups splintered away protesting the "negro pew" mentality. Two churches sprung up on Anderson Street and another on Phillips. But the most famous church still exists today at 8 Smith Court. The African Meeting House was more than a place of wor-

Please turn to next page

Meeting house was abolitionist catalyst

From preceding page

ship. With a major escape route in its own backyard, the meeting house became the community catalyst for anti-slavery activities, sponsored political debates and soldier recruitment, as well as cultural events and education.

Indeed, schooling became yet another instrument for change. Segregated schools were the norm on Beacon Hill in the early 19th century. The Phillips School, at the corner of Anderson and Pinckney Streets, was built in 1824 and was solely open to white children; on Joy Street, the Abiel Smith School educated only blacks. Challenging the status quo in 1849, black printer Benjamin Roberts hired Charles Sumner to protect his daughter's right for an equal and integrated education.

That right became law in 1855, voted by the Massachusetts Legislature or General Court, at the top of Beacon Hill. The new law prohibited the exclusion of children from public

Lewis Hayden

schools on the basis of race, religi and color and it seriously weaken the Fugitive-Slave Law in Massach setts.

Even Beacon Hill's social clu made their own contributions to t cause. Protesting, Southern symp thizers at Beacon Street's Somers Club, many distinguised anti-slave advocates formed their own assoc tion across Boston Common at 5 Pa St. Calling themselves the "Uni Club," members like Charles Sumn Henry Bowditch, Ralph Waldo Em son and Oliver Wendell Holmes voci rously defended President Abraha Lincoln and the emanicipation slaves. They were also "financing Jo Brown, founding the Free Soil Pa and Republican Party, (and) armi the Negro troops," according to t Club's 15th anniversary publication.

There was no greater symbol black freedom than the all-black Ma sachusetts 54th Regiment, who are d picted in a high-relief bronze and gra ite memorial on Boston Commo Beacon Hill. Sculptor Augustus Sai Gaudens re-created Brahmin Robe Gould Shaw's march, leading bla North Slope soldiers to battle and certain death.

The existence of such a regime was not a surprise here, howev where "a volatile alliance between m itant residents of 'Nigger Hill'...a some of the most promising you 'bluebloods' raised in their own neig borhood was already well-esta lished," says James Brewer Stewart the essay collection, "Courage a Conscience."

The black soldiers' names, iro cally, were not included on this Ci War monument until 100 years later 1982.

But in the end, William E. Gi napp explains in the same volume, city played a larger role in the an slavery movement than Boston. Wi its strong religious heritage, refor tradition, and active African-Americ community, the city served as t headquarters of the crusade again slavery during the antebellum peric During these years, as during the Re olution, Boston was in a very re sense the "Cradle of Liberty."

The Boston African-Americ National Historic Site conducts fr walking tours along the Black Herita Trail on Beacon Hill. Daily summ tours begin at the Museum of Afr American History, 47 Joy St. and i clude the African Meeting House. F more information, call (617) 742-5415

Also open to the public is t Harrison Gray Otis House on 141 Car bridge St. Authentically restored the 1780-1820 period, the house can l seen every Tuesday through Friday, p.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday from a.m. to 5 p.m., at $4 per adult and per child. For more information, ca the Society for the Preservation New England Antiquities (SPNEA) (617) 227-3956.

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