



The Abolitionist Movement in Boston

BACKGROUND

Beginning in the late 18th century and continuing through the middle of the 19th century, black people flocked to Boston because of its strong Underground Railroad network. This network helped hundreds of individuals and families secure and protect their freedom. After settling in Boston, freed and self-emancipated African Americans attended welcoming churches like the African Baptist Church or Twelfth Baptist Church and found work in businesses owned by black entrepreneurs. They also participated in the many educational and cultural events organized by the black Beacon Hill community that took place at the Abiel Smith School and the African Meeting House.

Names and Places To Know

- African Meeting House
- Black Beacon Hill
- Faneuil Hall
- Fugitive Slave Law
- William Lloyd Garrison
- Shadrach Minkins
- Underground Railroad
- David Walker / *Walker's Appeal*



The African Meeting House in Boston, circa 1885
[ENLARGE]

THE AFRICAN MEETING HOUSE

Built in 1806, this building hosted many antislavery gatherings, African American community celebrations and debates, and powerful lectures on the topics of the day. The New England Anti-Slavery Society was founded here in 1831.

In Focus

1. Examine this image of the African Meeting House. Is this a photograph or a drawing? How do you know?
2. Would you understand what this building was used for and where it is located without the caption? Who is standing outside?
3. Could this picture have been taken today? What details date the image?
4. Many public buildings and meeting places have prominent signs in front, but the African Meeting House appears to have had no such marker. Why do you think that might be the case?

Activities and Investigations

1. Visit the Web site of the African Meeting House at www.afroammuseum.org/afmbeaconhill.htm. View other images of the Meeting House and read more about its history. When and by whom was this building constructed? Why was it known as the “black Faneuil Hall”? What was ironic about the public dedication of the Meeting House?
2. The African Meeting House will celebrate its 200th anniversary in 2006. Working with a group of classmates, develop a proposal for a birthday celebration. The celebration could include speeches, drama, music, or other elements that reflect the rich history of the Meeting House. Share your proposal with the class. If time permits, stage some or all elements of the presentation.

Antislavery Protests in Boston

Although Massachusetts was the first colony to make slavery legal in 1641, New England's resistance to slavery dates to 1638, the year that the first enslaved Africans arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The opposition of individuals eventually evolved into full-fledged collective organizations that were dedicated to the abolition of slavery and to the attainment of equal rights for all persons of color. In 1826, the Massachusetts General Colored Association (MGCA), the first abolition society in the United States, was established. Its founders, a group of visionary African American men, began to shape new and effective resistance to slavery. Like the MGCA, the New England Anti-Slavery Society, organized five years later, was committed to ending slavery. New England frequently hosted antislavery events that drew hundreds of people.

WALKER'S APPEAL

Southern-born David Walker (c.1796–1830) arrived in Boston in 1825, opened a used-clothing business, and became a major activist in the African American community. Walker published the first edition of his revolutionary *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* on September 28, 1829, challenging African Americans to throw off their chains of bondage.

In Focus

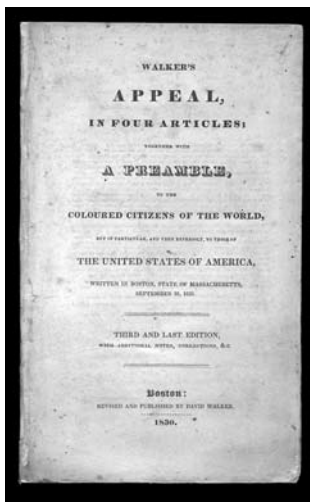
1. What information can you derive from this cover page of Walker's *Appeal*? When and where was the pamphlet written?
2. To whom is Walker appealing? What does this cover page reveal about the content of the appeal? What might you guess Walker has to say to his fellow African Americans on the subject of slavery in the United States?
3. Walker concludes his *Appeal* as follows:

“Hear your language, proclaimed to the world, July 4th, 1776 —‘We hold these truths to be self evident—that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!! that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness!!’ Compare your own language above, extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation!!!!!!”

What is your reaction to Walker's reference to the Declaration of Independence? Do you find his logic persuasive? How might slaveowners have responded to this argument?

Activities and Investigations

1. Using the Internet and other library sources, read the text of Walker's *Appeal*. (Excerpts are online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2931t.html.) Respond with an editorial written from one of the following viewpoints: an African American enslaved in the South; a white Bostonian who supported abolition; a slaveowner; a self-emancipated person of African descent; a 21st-century historian; the great-grandchild of David Walker. In your view, does Walker's *Appeal* deserve to be called, as one scholar claimed, “the most radical anti-slavery document of its time?” Why or why not?



Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, cover page [ENLARGE]

2. David Walker wrote numerous articles for *Freedom's Journal*, the first newspaper in the United States owned and operated by African Americans. Research and report on the origins, content, and impact of *Freedom's Journal*. All 103 issues can be found online at www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/aanp/freedom.

**Vigilance Committee
Treasurer's Accounts, 1850-59**

Explanatory

On the 15th Feb. 1851 Shadrach, a fugitive Slave from Virginia was arrested at the instance of John Caphari, a slave hunter from Norfolk Va. and taken before Commission[er] Curtis, who after the adjournment of the first examination, was rescued from the Suffolk Court house, by the colored people, & sent to Canada. For this brave act, Lewis Hayden, Robert Morris, James Scott & Elizur Wright were arrested, & tried before Judge Sprague of the U. S. Court, & were all acquitted: the expenses of these trials, are herewith recorded, & were defrayed by donations & contributions, entered on the opposite pages of this book.

Hon. John P. Hale, Richard H. Dana & Geo. Farley were the Lawyers employed to defend the rescuers.

Account of Shadrach Minkins's trial as it appeared in Vigilance Committee Treasurer's Accounts, 1850
[\[ENLARGE\]](#)

SHADRACH MINKINS'S TRIAL

In 1793, Congress passed the first Fugitive Slave Act. It targeted self-emancipated individuals and families, as well as people who had helped them out of bondage. In 1850, Congress strengthened this legislation. Under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, law enforcement officials in the North were ordered to arrest suspected fugitives and help return them to their previous owners in the South. Anyone who helped a self-emancipated person or interfered with his or her arrest could be imprisoned or fined. As a result, abolitionist work became more dangerous and costly, yet even more important.

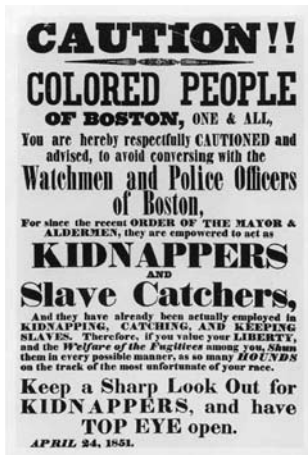
In February 1851, Shadrach Minkins became the first black man to be arrested in New England under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Minkins had escaped from enslavement in Virginia and was working as a waiter at Boston's Cornhill Coffee House when a "slave hunter" captured him and took him to a Boston courthouse for a hearing. In response, members of Boston's Vigilance Committee mobilized to defend Minkins. Many well-known Bostonians—black and white—were members of the 1850 Vigilance Committee. Black members included Robert Morris, the second black attorney in the nation; Peter Howard, an enterprising musician; and William Cooper Nell, a noted chronicler of black achievement. As this case shows, the Vigilance Committee engineered dramatic rescues of self-emancipated people who were threatened with arrest and return to bondage.

In Focus

1. According to this account, when and why was Minkins arrested? How would you define the term "slave hunter"?
2. What unusual event occurred after Minkins appeared before Commissioner Curtis? According to the text, who rescued Minkins?
3. What point of view is expressed in this document? Does the writer support or oppose the Fugitive Slave Law? How do you know?

Activities and Investigations

1. Finish the story. Learn more about the case of Shadrach Minkins. What happened to him in Boston? How and why did he go to Canada? Which members of the Vigilance Committee were most involved in helping him? Present your findings in the form of a letter that Minkins could have written to abolitionists in Boston after he reached Canada.
2. In your opinion, did the citizens who helped Shadrach Minkins escape to Canada do the right thing even though they broke the law? When, if ever, do you think it is okay to commit civil disobedience (that is, to disobey a law you consider unfair)? Share your thoughts in a brief essay. Be sure to discuss whether you would be willing to break the law and accept the consequences to support a cause you believe in.



"Caution!! Colored People of Boston," poster, 1851
[ENLARGE]

"CAUTION" POSTER

This notice, posted in Boston in 1851, warns African Americans to be on the lookout for kidnappers and slave catchers. It is important to remember that these kidnappings were *legal* under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. This law created an atmosphere of fear for African Americans living in the North. Self-emancipated men and women who thought they had escaped to freedom now found themselves in danger. Free African Americans were sometimes abducted, too, on the assumption that they had escaped from the South.

In Focus

1. Who was the audience for this poster? Does the poster make a distinction between free African Americans and those who had escaped from bondage? Why or why not?
2. Why was this poster created? What specific advice does it provide?
3. Given that slavery had been outlawed in Massachusetts since 1783, why do you think the mayor of Boston ordered the city's policemen to "act as kidnappers and slave catchers"?

Activities and Investigations

1. Imagine that the year is 1851 and you are a free African American living in Boston. You are walking down the street and meet a friend who has escaped from bondage in the South. Together, you see this poster for the first time. What is your reaction? What do you do—and how do you feel? Working with a partner, write the text of a dialogue between these two Bostonians.
2. How long did the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 remain in effect? Find out when and why this law was changed and share your findings with classmates.