

Exhibiting Black New England

How A Series of Historic Interpretive Signs Tell the Story of Black Newburyport

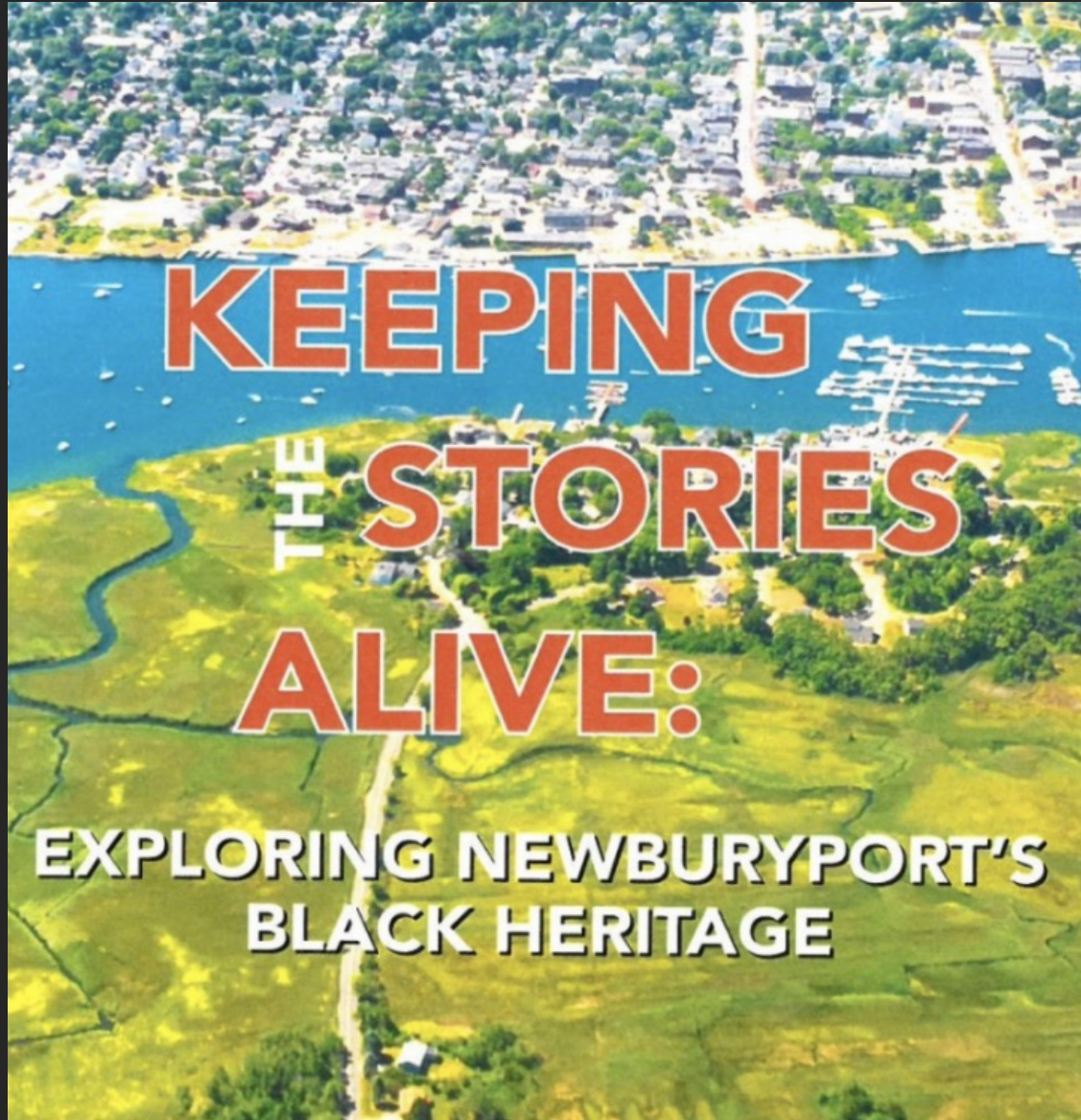
[Professor Kabria Baumgartner](#)

Northeastern University

Boston, MA



Part I: Exploring Black History



**eliminating racism
empowering women**

ywca

Greater Newburyport



Newburyport Black History Initiative

Mission

To ensure that the stories of Newburyport's early Black residents, businesses, and neighborhoods are made accessible to the public and becomes part of the city's collective identity.

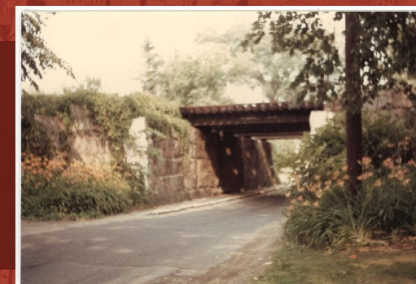
Founding Members: Geordie Vining; Kabria Baumgartner; Cyd Raschke

A Series of Historical Interpretive Signs



Part II: The Stories We Tell

Newburyport's Black population dwindled later in the 19th century, and this neighborhood was all but erased. Yet the name endured. The railroad bridge built over Low Street in 1840 was called Guinea Bridge before its removal in 1981. The southern end of Pond Street was once Guinea Lane and the rise on Hillside Avenue was Guinea Hill. When we walk these streets now, we retrace the steps of the people who called Newburyport's Black neighborhood home. *Text by Kabria Baumgartner, Georgia Vining, and Cyd Raschke (2022)*



ABOVE: Railroad bridge built in 1841 over Low Street and known as 'Guinea Bridge'
July 1981 photograph courtesy of the Newburyport Library Archival Center

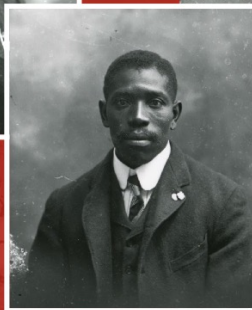
"It is evident that the great cheapness and universality of pictures must exert a powerful, though silent, influence upon the ideas and sentiment of present and future generations."

Frederick Douglass

Lecture on Pictures, December 3, 1863



ABOVE:
Portrait of Mary
Richardson, about 1880
Courtesy of the Newburyport
Public Library Archival Center



RIGHT:
Portrait of Edward
Richardson, about 1880
Courtesy of the Newburyport
Public Library Archival Center



IN THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES, MANY PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIOS OPERATED on State and Pleasant Streets in Newburyport. The photographs shown on this sign are part of a collection of glass plate images—white, Black, and Asian-American people of all ages—that were recovered in a basement on Liberty Street around 2003. During the early years of photography, most photographers specialized in portraits. While many of the subjects are unknown, some of their images have names written on them, including Edward and Mary Richardson.

Around 1867, eight-year-old Edward Richardson moved to Newburyport with his family. His father Adolphus Richardson worked as a mariner and his mother Julia Marie Sephrona (Davis) Richardson managed the household. Seven siblings were born over the next dozen years. In 1879, Edward married Mary J. Johnson and their studio portraits may have been taken around the time of their marriage. According to census records, Edward and Mary moved to Haverhill, where he worked as a laborer and a teamster who drove a job wagon. In this era, teamsters often worked 70 to 100 hours per week for low pay. Edward and Mary's first baby died as an infant in 1880, and their second son Charles was born. Mary died of breast cancer in 1910 at the age of 54. It is currently unknown when Edward died.

Studio photography held a particularly powerful meaning and significance for Black Americans within a larger society that often disparaged them. The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who once spoke at the Prospect Street Church in Newburyport, had about 160 studio portrait photographs taken of himself, and wrote that the great democratic art of photography was a "social force" and now available to even "the humblest servant girl." Dressed in fine clothing, Black people consciously shaped their own images and identities for their families and communities, visually countering negative mainstream stereotypes such as those evoked in derogatory blackface minstrel shows so popular in Newburyport during this time. Performances in City Hall featured white musicians who, with their faces painted black, caricatured the singing and dancing of Black people with racist songs. In contrast, the studio portraits seen here reflect the pride and dignity of Black Americans. Text by Geordie Vining, Kabria Baumgartner, and Cyd Raschke (2023)

Pictures with Purpose

19th-Century Studio Photography Empowered Black Americans



BACKGROUND AND ABOVE: Portraits of Black Newburyporters, about 1880
Courtesy of the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center



State Street, Newburyport, about 1880
Photograph by H.P. Macintosh, Courtesy of Getty Museum, Gift of Weston J. and Mary M. Noel

WHILE SLAVERY DECLINED IN LATE 18TH-CENTURY MASSACHUSETTS,

Black Americans continued to face significant social, legal, and educational discrimination. Public schools in Newburyport and other cities and towns excluded Black children or segregated them in rundown schoolhouses with few teachers and resources. There was a privately operated "African School" located "near the pond."

In 1820, a few courageous girls from Newburyport's Black neighborhood, then referred to as Guinea, sought to enroll at one of the public girls' grammar schools. *The Newburyport Daily News* reported white Newburyporters expressing "much annoyance" about this matter. In response, the School Committee voted to exclude Black children from the public schools. Private organizations stepped in again to provide Black children with some learning, and activists later compelled the Committee to open a separate public school for Black children. Educational opportunities and funding, however, remained decisively unequal.

Black Newburyporters continued pushing for equal school rights, and, by 1843, the city's public schools opened their doors to all children, regardless of race. In 1855, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to pass equal school rights legislation. Public school committees could no longer use race to classify students, and some Black families relocated to neighborhoods where their children would receive the best possible education.

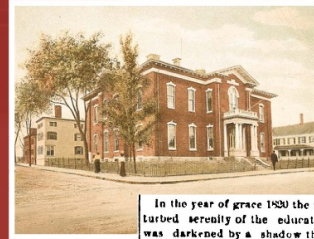
Newburyport's education system helped shape one of Massachusetts' most prominent civic leaders, Melnea Jones Cass. In 1901, Alfred and Mary Drew Jones migrated with Melnea and her siblings from Richmond, Virginia, to Boston seeking opportunity. When Mary died in 1905, Alfred sent their three daughters to be cared for by their aunt Ella Drew, a domestic servant in Newburyport. Ella arranged for her nieces to attend the Kelley School where Melnea distinguished herself as a high-achieving student. After graduating from the Kelley School, she left Newburyport and continued her studies elsewhere before returning to Boston, working as a domestic servant, and marrying Marshall Cass in 1917. Soon after, Melnea Cass began leading marches, organizing school sit-ins and boycotts, and preparing lawsuits against the Boston School Committee.

By the civil rights era, racial segregation, whether by law or by practice, was a national problem. A flood of school integration cases culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the decision of which outlawed segregation in public schools. Black lawyer and later Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall spoke about the victory when he visited Newburyport's Congregation Ahavas Achim synagogue in 1958: "Once a generation has gone to school together, worked together, and lived together, prejudice will largely disappear." This vision has not yet been realized. Black children and their allies continue to champion equal school rights, here and nationally. Their fight goes on.

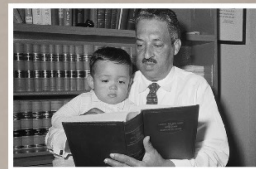
Text by Kabria Baumgartner, Georgie Vining, and Cyl Raschke (2023)

Fighting for Equal School Rights

For centuries, Black Newburyporters have struggled for the right of all children to high quality public schooling without regard to race.



In the year of grace 1820 the usually undisturbed serenity of the educational horizon was darkened by a shadow that for a time gave much uneasiness to the learned divines and other dignified men that were guardians of the schools. Some young ladies of Guinea, not satisfied with their educational privileges dared to present themselves at one of the female grammar schools. This caused much annoyance both to parents and school committee and after considerable talk the authorities voted that "girls of color be excluded from the female grammar schools." The education of the colored children was a cause of much uneasiness to the town. The Fr



LEFT FROM TOP:
Newburyport Kelley School
historic postcard c.1911
Courtesy of the Museum of Old Newbury

Excerpt from "Female Schools and Primary Schools" by O.B. Merrill, *Newburyport Daily Herald*, January 5, 1878
Courtesy of Newburyport Daily News

Thurgood Marshall reading to his son Thurgood, Jr. in 1958
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-112127

BACKGROUND IMAGE:
1913 Class Picture
Newburyport's Davenport School
(on Congress Street)
Courtesy of Newburyport Public Library
Archival Center



Melnea Jones Cass

RIGHT: Melnea Cass
1969 portrait
Courtesy of Northeastern
University Archives,
A103-A06291

FAR RIGHT: Melnea
Cass testifies at the
Massachusetts State House
c. 1970
Courtesy of Bay State Banner



Part III: Community Collaboration

Working with Local Organizations

- Friends of William Lloyd Garrison
- Museum of Old Newbury
- Newburyport Public Library & Archival Center

result in great advantage.
With these views and to promote this
we request the Town to grant a sum not
exceeding three hundred dollars to be expended in
the support of a School for the Africans the ensuing
year, and to make up the above said deficiency.

Newburyport march 17th 1812

Benjamin Wyath

John Pearson

Samuel Tenney

Thomas Sanborn

Ebenezer Gunnison

Media Coverage



Newburyport celebrates Black history with new sign

By Jim Sullivan | jsullivan@newburyportnews.com Feb 2, 2023 Updated Feb 2, 2023

The Town Common

A City's Black History Remembered

by [Stewart Lytle](#)

Wednesday August 03, 2022



New interpretive panel in Newburyport honors city's Black abolitionists

By [Maeve Lawler](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated December 3, 2023, 9:13 p.m.



Tips & Advice

- Explore archival records in your town or city and consider the following questions:
 1. What or whose stories are missing and ought to be told?
 2. How would a historical interpretive sign help residents and visitors better understand those stories and your community's history?
- Find collaborators who are interested in doing rigorous historical research and telling these stories.
- Engage community members and local leaders every step of the way.
- Partner with local organizations (YWCA, the public library, etc.).
- Contact a local university's Public History program (i.e., Northeastern, Tufts, Salem State, etc.) and inquire about potential areas of mutual interest and support.
- For funding, check whether your town or city has adopted the Community Preservation Act. Consider applying for a [Mass Humanities](#) grant.



Thank You.

<https://www.cityofnewburyport.com/planning-development/newburyport-black-history-initiative>

