

Boston's slavery ties deepened by findings at First Church in Roxbury

A 55-page report reveals church's earliest congregants enslaved at least 58 Africans and Indigenous people.

By [Tiana Woodard](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 6, 2023, 6:06 p.m.



Former state representative Byron Rushing, Harvard PhD fellow Aabid Allibhai and Rev. Mary Margaret Earl stand outside the First Church in Roxbury in Boston, on Feb. 6. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/CARLIN STIEHL

As Boston reckons with its role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, much of the recognition of the city's past has been focused on historically white neighborhoods and places, from Old South Church in the Back Bay to Faneuil Hall in Government Center. But new research by a Harvard doctoral student shows that slavery infiltrated all corners of Boston, including today's mostly Black neighborhoods such as Roxbury.

A [55-page report](#) presented at the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry in Roxbury Monday night provides evidence of at least 58 Africans and Indigenous people enslaved by white parishioners of the First Church in

Roxbury from 1631 to 1775, eight years before Massachusetts abolished slavery.

The evidence was discovered by Aabid Allibhai, a Harvard University African and African American Studies doctoral fellow who wrote the report as part of an effort to build greater awareness of the horrors faced and contributions made by those enslaved in early America.

“This report is just the start,” Allibhai said. “I’m sure I’ve seen most of the records of enslaved people here, but . . . I want to find out more.”

The research, historians and others who have followed Boston’s role in slavery say, allows for a deeper understanding of Boston’s racist history, and provides more proof that Massachusetts, too, bears responsibility for its history of owning and profiting from human beings.

While Boston’s ties to the slave trade are commonly understood, only a handful of sites in Roxbury have been tied to slavery. Limited archival resources and few surviving records make research limited, and the First Church’s ties were not previously known.



People attend a presentation on slavery and Boston's ongoing confrontation of its racist history inside the First Church in Roxbury in Boston, on Feb. 6. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/CARLIN STIEHL

“There’s very little Boston history where they tell the truth,” said Byron Rushing, president of the Roxbury Historical Society and a former state representative. “When liberal white people tell us how sorry they are, and

how they want to apologize, I want them to understand the horror that I'm talking about.”

For years, Rushing said, he has pressed for the Greater Roxbury community to take a closer look at slavery. But the conversations have rarely gone anywhere.

So Rushing approached the urban ministry, a social justice organization that now operates from the First Church, to see if that group could help research the history of slavery in Roxbury. As one of Roxbury's original churches, Rushing reasoned First Church might have some of the oldest records of people — free or enslaved — in the neighborhood. From there, the ministry commissioned Allibhai to draft a report.

The Rev. Mary Margaret Earl, executive director and senior minister of the ministry, said the institution has a responsibility to share a more complete picture of the history of the community it serves, and that includes the neighborhood's ties to the slave trade.

“After the killing of George Floyd, there was a new commitment of showing our relationship with white supremacy,” Earl said.

One of the only other known proofs of slavery in Roxbury lies at the Shirley-Eustis House, where Allibhai in 2021 found evidence of an outbuilding that served as slave quarters for the estate.

Separately, grassroots historian Wayne Tucker completed the [Eleven Names Project](#), originally named for the 11 — now 12 — people enslaved by the Dudley family, which was based in Roxbury in the 17th and 18th centuries.



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Though Allibhai's report focused on the history of slavery in Roxbury, it also explores ways in which Indigenous and Black people contributed to early America. Though historians have long believed Puritan missionary John Eliot — for whom the historic Eliot District in Roxbury is named — acted alone in printing North America's earliest Bible in Algonquian, he leaned on Indigenous interpreters to translate the religious text, the report found.

One piece of church history that stands out to some scholars is evidence of what could possibly be the first interracial couple to request formal marriage, and to be married. Thomas Bedunah, a free Black man, married Lydia Craft, a white woman, in 1703; two years later, Massachusetts banned interracial marriage.

The report found evidence that, beyond the marriage of Bedunah and Craft, the First Church had an interracial congregation. But that doesn't mean the early parishioners existed in racial harmony. In 1741, the parishioners voted to designate the western corner of the meeting house for Black people "so as not to Intrude on ye pews in the said west Galleries" — an early form of segregation in Boston.

Ethan Goodnight, an American Studies doctoral candidate at Harvard, said church practices such as segregation helped develop the legacy of racial divisions and white supremacy in America. Since most of the early settlers in New England were Protestant, the white parishioners needed to define their superiority in

ways other than their religion by the 1750s, he said.

Some stories of resistance in the everyday lives of those who were enslaved survived. Maria, an enslaved Black

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home of her enslaver. Others, such as an enslaved Black man named Sharper, ran away from their enslavers.

Kyera Singleton, executive director of the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, said the report could be a learning opportunity for the Greater Roxbury community, letting the First Church congregation and residents in the neighborhood come to terms with Roxbury's past.

"We don't have to keep this history in the past," Singleton said. "These legacies are quite literally impacting the Black and Brown communities that live in Massachusetts every single day."

Tiana Woodard is a Report for America corps member covering Black neighborhoods. She can be reached at tiana.woodard@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@tianarochon](https://twitter.com/tianarochon).

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