

Site History: The Abyssinian Meeting House

The Abyssinian Meeting House was built in 1828. The building served as a church and was the heart of Portland's Black community. Temperance meetings, (the temperance, suffrage, and abolition moments were closely tied in the nineteenth century) sewing circles, concerts and lectures were all held here. The Meeting House also served as a school for the city's Black children who were segregated from their White counterparts.

The meeting house closed in 1917, in part due to competition for parishioners from the nearby Green Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church. The building was remodeled as tenement apartments in 1924. Eventually the building fell into disrepair and was seized by the city for unpaid taxes. The building was sold to the Committee to Restore the Abyssinian in 1998. Since that time the Committee has worked to restore the building to its original 1828 layout. In 2022 the Committee received \$1.7 million in federal funding to help complete the restoration. The Abyssinian Meeting House is on the national Register of Historic Places and is the United State's third oldest surviving African American Meeting House.

The Underground Railroad

The Meeting House served as the center of Portland's Underground Railroad. Portland became an increasingly important stop on the Underground Railroad following the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act that allowed Southern deputies to pursue self-emancipating enslaved Africans into Northern states. The activities of Portland's Underground Railroad were organized by the African Diaspora Community with the assistance of White allies. The network included hack men, individuals employed as horse-drawn taxi drivers, to transport the self-emancipating individuals around the city, safe houses, barber shops, where individuals could change their appearance with wigs and fake beards, and second-hand clothing dealers where an individual could disguise themselves with new clothes. There were several routes from Portland to Canada including the overnight boats to the Canadian Maritimes and a land route that went around Sebago Lake before heading to the Canadian border.

Munjoy Hill's African Diaspora Community

In the wake of emancipation in Massachusetts' province of Maine in 1783 a community of free Black people congregated along the base of Munjoy Hill, close to the waterfront and the jobs related to it. The 1850 Maine census reflects the importance of maritime industries for Blacks in Portland. The occupations of stevedore, fishermen, stewards and shipwrights are listed as the employment for over half of the city's Black population. Black Mainers also found livelihoods in related maritime industries such as sailmakers, ship caulkers, blacksmiths, hackmen, restaurateurs and boardinghouse owners.

The money generated by Black maritime workers allowed them to purchase homes in the Munjoy Hill neighborhood. This wealth also allowed individuals to fund community institutions such as sailors benevolent societies which cared for elderly and injured sailors and to fund houses of worship like the Abyssinian Meeting House.

Munjoy Hill's Other Communities

As a result of the Irish potato famine the community of African Heritage individuals living on Munjoy Hill were joined by large numbers of Irish immigrants starting in the 1840s. The Irish were followed by Italian, Greek, Albanian, Polish, Russian, Northern European, Armenian and Eastern European Jews as the nineteenth century progressed. The areas two Catholic Churches, where Irish and Italians worshipped, synagogue, and Italian shops and restaurants remain today as a testament to the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood.