



Museum of Old Newbury photo

In this 1929 image, Moses Prophet Townes stands just to the left of the steps of Wolfe Tavern, where he worked as a doorman and porter for more than 50 years.

# A landmark WITHIN a landmark

Moses Prophet Townes was a 'suave and popular' fixture at historic hotel

By GEORDIE VINING

History can get buried fast – particularly about ordinary people who can get overlooked or forgotten unless their stories are told and retold. There are also big stories inside the smaller stories of individual lives.

Moses Prophet Townes is one who deserves to be remembered.

At the corner of State and Harris streets in Newburyport, there is now a landscaped municipal parking lot located across from the library. Two decades ago, the parking lot replaced a gas station built in the 1950s called Gas Land. But before the gas station, this was the site of a grand and beautiful hotel called Wolfe Tavern.

With 60 rooms for guests, a dining room for 100 people, a barbershop, a café and a billiards room, the Wolfe was a well-known destination for tourists, celebrities and business travelers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, due to a steady decline in business during the Great Depression and after World War



Courtesy image

Gas Land was a gas station at the corner of State and Harris streets, replacing Wolfe Tavern after the hotel was demolished in 1954. Today, the space is a parking lot. At right are clips from The Daily News announcing the Christmas Day 1899 wedding of Moses Prophet Townes and Eliza Ann Dickson and Moses' funeral in August 1951, as well as a goodbye message from the Townes family.

II, the owner demolished the building in 1954.

Townes worked as a doorman and porter at the Wolfe for more than 50 years, as well as at Garrison Inn in Brown Square.

In November 1916, an article from The Boston Globe was partially reprinted in The Daily News of Newburyport and described him as "Moses P. Townes, an attendant in the Wolfe Tavern in Newburyport, a landmark within a landmark." The article singled Townes out as making friends with a popular visiting evangelist named Billy Sunday. Townes had worked at the Wolfe for 30 years at that point.

## From Virginia to Newburyport

Townes was born in 1859 in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, just before the Civil War. About two-thirds of the people living in Mecklenburg County at that time were African American, and over 90% of them were enslaved until after the war. It is unknown whether Townes was born enslaved. He was the eldest of seven surviving children; six of his siblings died in childhood.

His parents, Ottaway and Henrietta Townes, were described as formerly enslaved farmers who could not read or write. Particularly in the 1830s and onward, Virginia passed anti-literacy laws banning teaching reading and writing to Black people due to fears of Black

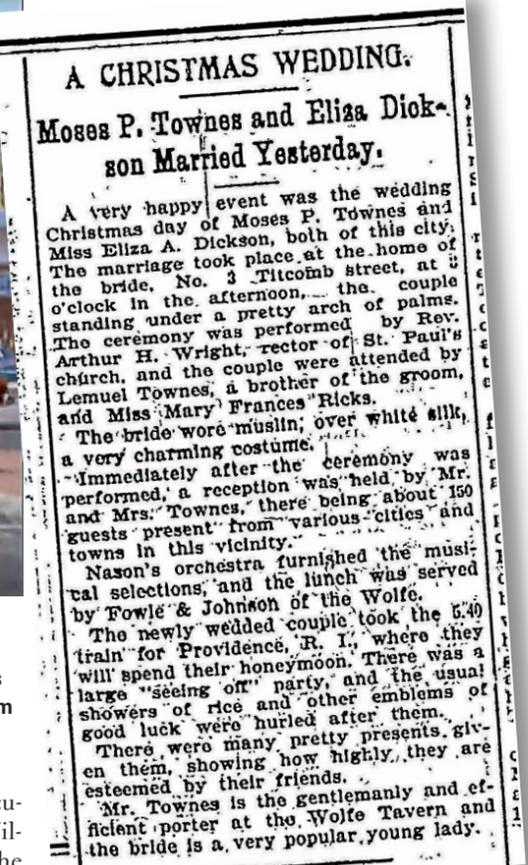
abolitionist David Walker's widely circulated 1829 "Appeal" pamphlet and William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper The Liberator, which began in 1831. Census records list Moses' education as through the sixth grade.

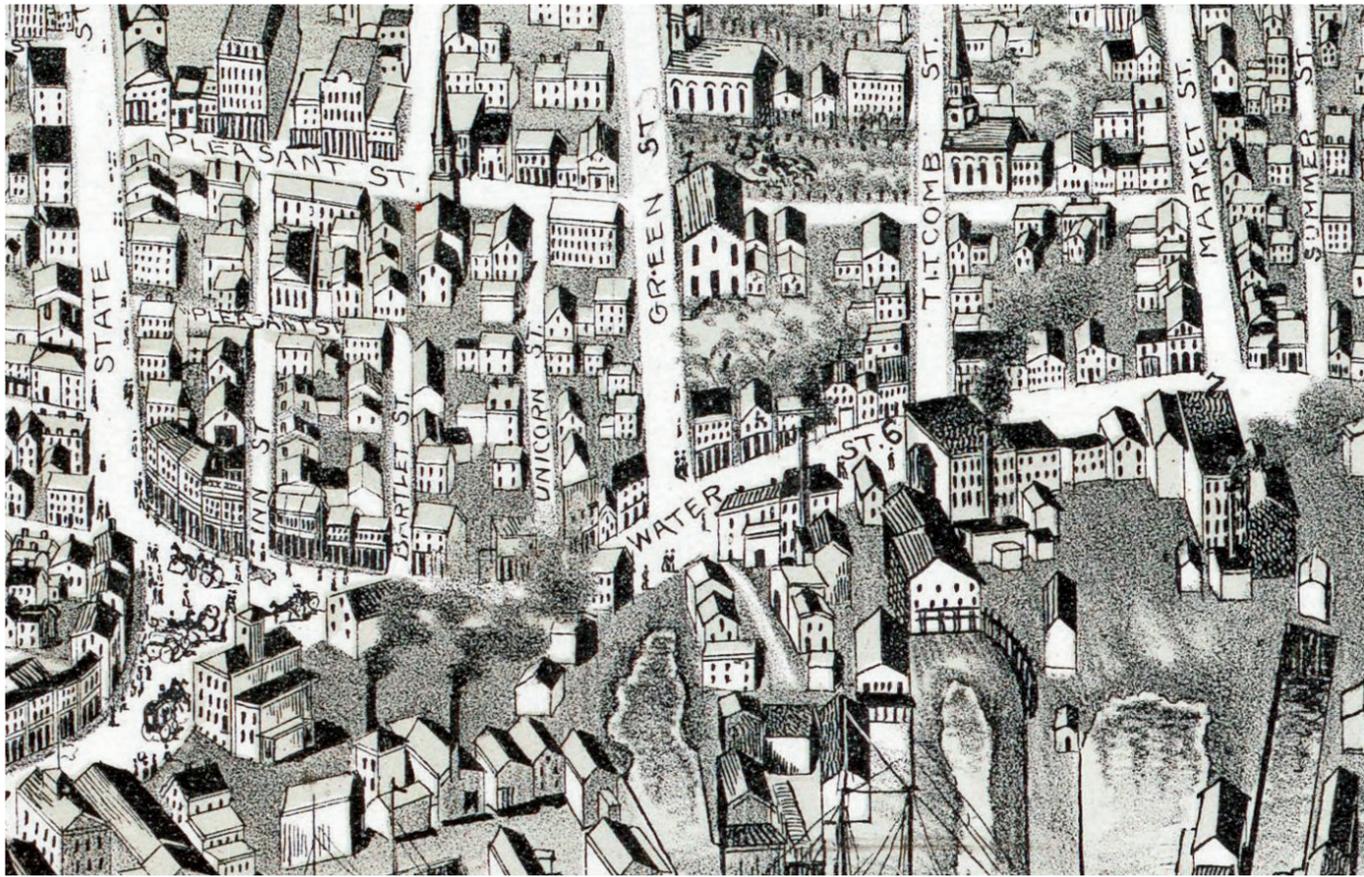
While it is not known exactly why Moses decided to leave home and migrate north, the post-Civil War era in Mecklenburg County and the rest of the state of Virginia was generally a turbulent one with widespread poverty and racial terror, including a number of documented lynchings during the 1880s in Virginia.

As a young man, Moses joined thousands of other Black people migrating north in the late 19th century in the precursor to what would later become the Great Migration of more than 6 million Black people uprooting from the rural South. Some of Moses' siblings, Lemuel, Walter and Amanda, followed him to Newburyport. Like the Townes siblings, more than half of Newburyport's Black residents in the early 20th century were originally from the South.

By 1886, Moses lived at Wolfe Tavern as a boarder, where he worked as a porter welcoming guests, carrying bags and facilitating people's travel.

In 1899, he married Eliza Ann Dickson (sometimes spelled Dixon),





An 1894 map provided by the Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at Boston Public Library includes Titcomb Street, where Moses Prophet Townes and Eliza Townes lived in her family home for 50 years.

a piano teacher and later the organist at Union Baptist Church and Beulah Baptist Church, which used to be on Temple Street. Some of Eliza's piano recitals were at the Wolfe. Eliza also played the piano for gatherings of Newburyport's Du Bois Musical and Literary Club, which honored W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the most important national civil rights leaders in the first half of the 20th century.

The newlyweds took the train to Providence, Rhode Island, for their honeymoon, and Moses moved into Eliza's family home at the corner of Titcomb and Merrimac streets, where they would live for the next 50 years. The house was only a short distance from Garrison Inn, and apparently, the residence had a sign on its side directing travelers to the inn where he worked. (The original house at 3 Titcomb is no longer there; it was replaced by another building that was moved to this spot in 1984.)

Census records indicate that the couple sometimes shared their home with various boarders. Moses' brother Lemuel and his family, along with another brother, Walter, lived across the street. Moses and Eliza had a son, Thomas Daniel

Townes, in 1897, and they sent him to live temporarily with Moses' parents in Virginia when he was very young before bringing him back to live with them in Newburyport.

A 1908 article in *The Daily News* highlights 10-year-old Thomas Townes as being a "faithful attendant" at all 52 Sunday School sessions in 1907 at the Baptist Sunday School. Thomas enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1918 during World War I. In 1904, Moses and Eliza had a second child, Eleanor Ruth, who died as an infant.

### Newsworthy endeavors

Over the years, *The Daily News* published many articles about Moses, characterizing him as "suave and popular," "gentlemanly and efficient," and covering such topics as his return from a visit to Virginia, his eye treatments and his leadership in a number of local clubs. He was president for several years of the Benjamin F. Butler Club, located at 3 Liberty St. between 1919 and 1921. All of the officers and board members of this club were Black men of Newburyport.

Butler (1818-1893) was a famous Union major general during the Civil War and

later a Newburyport congressman and governor of Massachusetts. He was the first to establish unofficial units of Black troops and was an early advocate for recruiting Black soldiers, very publicly recognizing the bravery and heroism of Black soldiers with medals and proclamations. Butler also co-authored the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which attempted to desegregate public places throughout the country in the waning days of Reconstruction.

In addition, Moses was steward in 1905 of the local Elks Club and the treasurer in 1910 of the Independent Order of St. Luke, which was a national society that promoted Black economic independence and provided insurance, financing, food and clothing for Black families.

Moses was active in civic affairs, and his signature is found on a handwritten 1909 petition to the Newburyport mayor and Board of Aldermen from "the Colored Citizens of this City" requesting that the city's church bells be rung morning, noon and night on the Feb. 12 birthday of President Abraham Lincoln. The original petition is now at the Newburyport Public Library's Archival Center.

The local articles published about

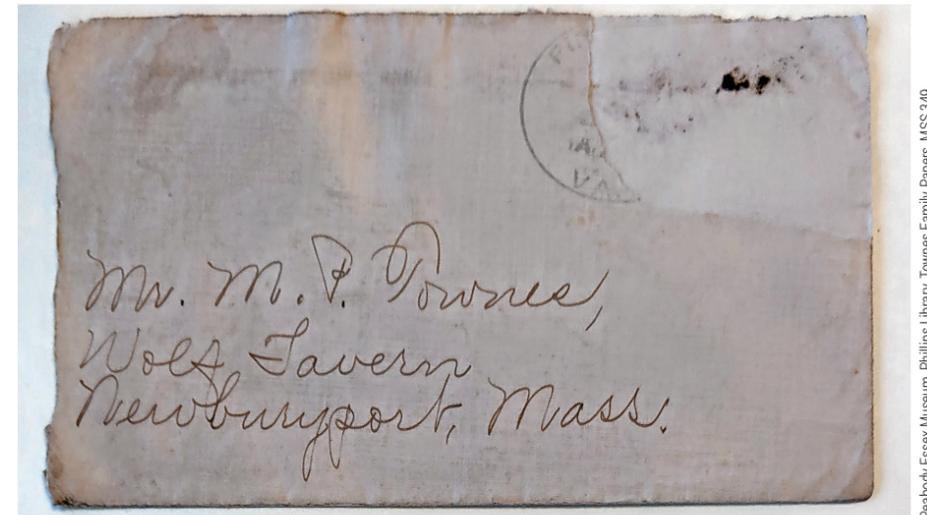
Moses as an individual are consistently positive, but it is evident from other articles and advertisements in the newspaper that Newburyport was not the most hospitable place for Black residents in general. It is eye-opening how regularly a racial slur is used in *The Daily News* during his lifetime, reflecting common usage. The word was used in "humorous" stories and poems that featured racist dialects and vicious mocking stereotypes of Black people. The word described the color of a skirt in a 1915 advertisement in the paper; it was published as the pet name of various black cats, dogs and horses in the 1920s to '40s; it was used in figures of speech; it was part of the name of a local creek where Massachusetts Audubon Society acquired 16 acres of land in 1940. The word was used in the names of songs performed in the immensely popular blackface minstrel shows in City Hall, the high school and elsewhere. Reckoning with this history means reckoning with racism in Newburyport, a community where Moses nonetheless connected with so many people and worked to support himself, his family and the Black community.

In 1929, *The Daily News* reported that Moses was the target of a federal sting operation for selling two pints of liquor at Wolfe Tavern in violation of the National Prohibition Act. Prohibition was the nationwide ban on the sale of alcohol between 1920 and 1933, and a large number of people in Newburyport and Salisbury were involved with rum-smuggling operations and had establishments selling illegal alcohol. In one of the bigger cases, a Newburyport city councilor, Albert H. Reynolds, pleaded guilty in 1925 to bribing a Coast Guard officer along with a Salisbury police chief and selectman to smuggle liquor in by boat from "Rum Row," where liquor-laden ships anchored offshore outside U.S. jurisdiction.

In late 1929, Moses pleaded guilty to selling the two pints of liquor and was heavily fined \$100 by the judge. This was a substantial sum, the equivalent of perhaps two months of wages for a hotel porter. The 1940 census, a decade later, indicates that Moses' annual salary was \$520.

### Gone but not forgotten

Moses worked full time at Wolfe Tavern until World War II. The 1940 census indicates that at the age of 81, he was still working 56 hours per week and 52 weeks a year as a porter. A small article in *The Daily News* in late 1943 describes Townes as an "aged employee of the Garrison



An envelope from May 1918 is addressed to Moses Prophet Townes at Wolfe Tavern.

## Highlighting Black history

The Newburyport Black History Initiative is uncovering forgotten or overlooked stories about the community's past. Geordie Vining, who has worked for more than 20 years as the senior project manager for the city of Newburyport, is collaborating with Dr. Kabria Baumgartner, professor of history and African studies at Northeastern University, and

Cynthia Raschke, former president of YWCA Greater Newburyport, along with other local historians. The initiative is installing several interpretive signs around the city, including one about Moses Prophet Townes.

Any descendants or relatives of Townes are encouraged to contact Vining at [gvining@cityofnewburyport.com](mailto:gvining@cityofnewburyport.com).

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Wolfe Tavern, Newburyport, Mass.

A 1925 postcard shows Wolfe Tavern, which operated from 1814 to 1953 after the original structure burned down in the Great Fire of 1811.



Moses Prophet Townes and Eliza Townes are buried next to each other in Highland Cemetery in Newburyport. Their gravestone is pictured after a cleaning by local historian Ghlee Woodworth in March 2022.

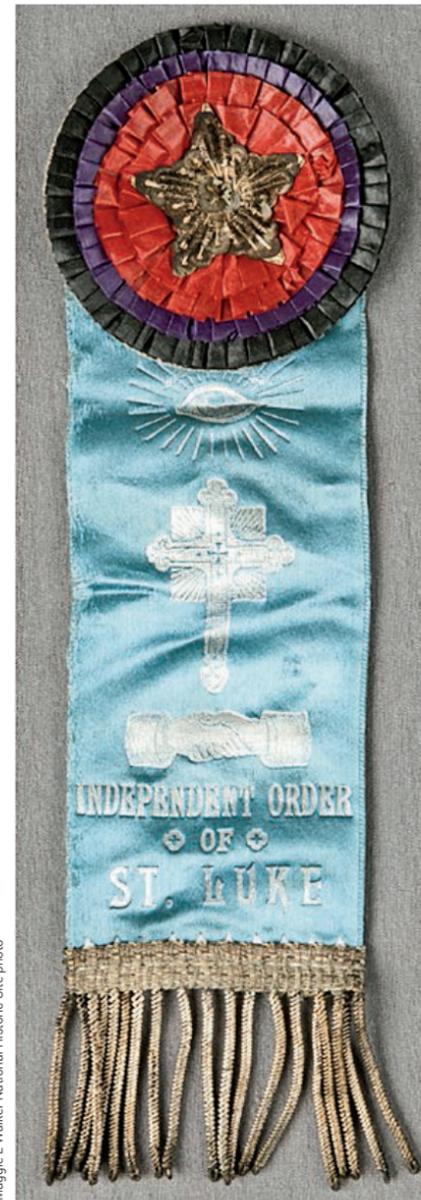
Inn,” still working at 84, although he apparently had to stop working shortly thereafter.

In 1951, the last year Wolfe Tavern was open to the public, Moses died. Among his pallbearers were two of his nephews who had grown up in Newburyport, Ulysses “Uly” L. Townes and Daniel E. Townes, and Kenneth L. Cousins – uncle of former Essex County Sheriff and Newburyport resident Frank Cousins Jr.

Moses is buried next to Eliza, who died in 1957, in Newburyport’s Highland Cemetery on Hill Street. One can see the small flat gravestone flush with the ground marking their final resting place today.

In the 1930s and ’40s, as Newburyport stagnated during the Great Depression and afterward, Moses’ relatives moved away from Newburyport to New York and New Jersey and elsewhere for work and other opportunities, just as he had moved away from his home in Virginia in search of a better life.

While many of the sites associated with this man and his family have not been preserved, and only fragments remain of their personal history, some of the accounts and stories have survived at the



Moses Prophet Townes was a member of the Independent Order of St. Luke, a society promoting Black economic independence.

edge of our vision.

On Aug. 27, 1951, shortly after his funeral, The Daily News printed the words of two hymns as a final message from his family:

*“Once in the thundering breakers,  
Doubting that help would come,  
Now with my wonderful Saviour  
Sailing for home sweet home.  
Once in the darkness despairing  
Hope and ambition gone,  
Now with my Saviour rejoicing  
Gladly I’m sailing home.  
Sleep on dear one and  
Take your rest.  
We loved you but  
God loved you best.”* 🙏



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