

A Black Neighborhood in Historic Newburyport

DOWN IN "GUINEA."
A Few Recollections Concerning the Old-Time Residents of That Locality

The whirling of time is silent in its revolution, and, like the kaleidoscope, ever changing. I was more forcibly reminded of this when taking a stroll recently in different parts of your beautiful city. I went my way down into what used to be called "Guinea." But alas! where are the inhabitants, thought I, of that rough, who flourished here some 60 or 70 years ago? And echo answered, "gone where the woodbine twines."

I could seem to see the programme of election day being carried out to its full, and I, as a little surburban, entered into its enjoyment with greater zest and pleasure than a trip, now, to the world's fair would afford. The residents of that little hamlet, as far as memory serves, were Titus Pickering, George Paul, Charles Jackson, Fred Patel, Joe Patel, Andrew Raymond, William Brown, Joseph Brown, John Phillips, John Young, Mrs. Taylor and "Mama" Lovell, as she was familiarly called, with many others.

One of the elite was Barber Cambridge, who had a shop on Broadway, and a residence in the rear. If he were on the earth today, he might have the sobriquet, "Dude," applied to his personage, for he was an exquisitely genteel, handsome man.

John Phillips was an acrobat of the first water for those days, and was proficient in turning somersaults, walking on his hands, heels up, etc., to the great delight of the lookers on.

John Young, Andrew Raymond and "Charlie" Jackson were of the topical profession. Raymond's place of business was on Pleasant street, just this side of the corner of State and Pleasant streets. He also had a remunerative business in the "press beer line, being dispensed from a neat hand-cart plying about town.

The color line was not so strictly drawn in those days as to deter some of the boys of that rude hamlet from attending Master Coolidge's school, and soon turned out well. Fred Patel, we learn, was in the Boston Custom House for many years, attaining to quite a competence, and now lives in Cambridgeport.

George Paul, as we recollect him, was pre-eminently a fine skater, and a good jumper, favorably to the modern "sports," and were he living he would overcome his modesty and enter for the world's championship.

The remains of John Young lie buried on the Old Hill, and we could but think how just was the inscription on his gravestone, prepared, no doubt, by his true friend, the late George J. L. Cobb, both of whom "sleep the sleep that knows no waking," as far as this life is concerned.

GEORGE W. PARSONS.
Salem, July, 1893.

NEWBURYPORT AND VICINITY.
Dwelling House Burned.
About 12 o'clock Friday noon an alarm of fire was sounded, caused by the burning of a two-story frame dwelling house on Auburn street, (Guinea), owned by Jacob E. Dixon, and occupied by John Hudson in one part and Mrs. Celia Ambush, a widowed colored lady, in the other. The alarm was very faint, only a part of the fire department learning that there was a fire until almost an hour after, and much complaint was raised because the fire gongs on the mills did not sound.

Guinea Neighborhood

IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, ABOUT 100 BLACK RESIDENTS LIVED IN NEWBURYPORT and many resided in the neighborhood where you now stand near Auburn and Low Streets. Newburyport and other communities across the Northeast used to refer to Black enclaves like this one as "Guinea," suggesting a connection to the west coast of Africa and the geographic center of the Atlantic slave trade. Using this term for Black communities carried with it the stigma of slavery. Today, we acknowledge the name and its origin. The resilient inhabitants of this neighborhood were a significant part of Newburyport's history and we remember them.

After a hard day's labor, the residents returned to their modest whitewashed dwellings around the Auburn, Pond, and Low Street intersection behind the Old Hill Burying Ground. Local census records show four times as many Black residents living in Newburyport than in all the surrounding towns combined. While the heart of the city's Black community was here, a few poor Irish immigrants also lived in this area in the mid- to late 19th century.

Every spring, residents of this neighborhood hosted a jubilant homegrown Black Election Day celebration. Revelers feasted on cake and ale, acrobats performed dazzling stunts, and fiddlers roused the crowd to dance the night away. Residents debated and voted for their own elected officials, such as mariner James Douglas, whom they crowned as their community king. The festivities attracted white people like George W. Parsons, who remembered celebrating Election Day as a child, "down in 'Guinea' ... that little hamlet... with great zest and pleasure."

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, Geordie Vining, and Cyd Raschke (2022)*

This neighborhood was home to a vibrant Black community of mariners and laborers who lived and worked here during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.



FAR LEFT: *Newburyport Daily Herald* and *Newburyport Daily News* articles dated 1878 and 1893 referencing residents of the 'Guinea' neighborhood.

BACKGROUND: Detail of an 1894 Newburyport map

Courtesy of the Boston Public Library
Norman B. Leventhal Map and Education Center

ABOVE: Railroad bridge built in 1841 over Low Street and known as 'Guinea Bridge'

July 1981 photograph courtesy of the Newburyport Library Archival Center