



**IN CITY COUNCIL**

**ORDERED:**

**May 8, 2023**

**Locations for Newburyport Black History Initiative Interpretive Signs**

**THAT** the City Council of the City of Newburyport hereby authorizes the Mayor and his designated representatives to install interpretive signs related to the Newburyport Black History Initiative in the locations defined in the attached memorandum dated 4/25/2023 and entitled “Newburyport Black History Initiative – Locations for Historic Interpretive Signs.” The signs will be sited to maximize public viewing and honor the subject matter, to encourage viewing with sufficient space to avoid conflicts, and to be near features that are related to the subject matter.

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Councillor Constance Preston

**In City Council May 8, 2023:**

Motion to refer to Planning & Development by Councillor Preston, seconded by Councillor Zeid. Roll call vote. 11 yes. Motion passes.



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT  
OFFICE OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT  
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NEWBURYPORT, MA 01950  
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SEAN REARDON  
MAYOR

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MEMORANDUM

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TO: **CITY COUNCIL**  
FROM: **GEORDIE VINING, SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER**  
SUBJECT: **NEWBURYPORT BLACK HISTORY INITIATIVE – LOCATIONS FOR HISTORIC INTERPRETIVE SIGNS**  
DATE: 4/25/23

This memo requests the City Council's approval of locations for the installation of several Newburyport Black History Initiative interpretive signs. We are grateful for the City Council's approval of CPA funding for this project on 6/13/22. We continue to work with local resident and Northeastern University Professor of History and Africana Studies Dr. Kabria Baumgartner on the project along with many others. The signs will center the stories of Black Americans who lived and worked in Newburyport from the pre-Revolutionary War era to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. We have finalized approximately half of the signs and are working on the balance. All of the signs have gone through a rigorous research, writing, and layout process which has included significant input from the Newburyport Public Library's Archival Center and the Museum of Old Newbury, as well as a number of other historians, editors, and Black community stakeholders.

In general, the criteria for siting the signs includes:

- Locating the historic interpretive sign near features, buildings, and sites that are related to the sign's subject matter and people as much as possible.
- Locating the signs in the shared public space of Newburyport's downtown core to maximize viewing by both residents and visitors and honor the Black history subject matter.
- Siting the signs just off of sidewalks and travelled ways to encourage viewing but with enough physical space to avoid clutter or conflicts.

See the attached appendix for illustration of the sites. We anticipate that these interpretive signs will be finalized, fabricated, and installed some time in 2023, and possibly into 2024. The Parks Commission has approved the location of the other interpretive signs in parks under the Commission's jurisdiction (Tracy Park, Brown Square, Bartlet Mall, Inn Street, and Rail Trail).

Please see the project page on the City's website for more materials about the Newburyport Black History Initiative, including videos, layouts, two magazine articles, and some images from the 2/1/23 event celebrating the installation of the first sign: <https://www.cityofnewburyport.com/planning-development/newburyport-black-history-initiative>

Thank you for your consideration.

# Newburyport Black History Initiative

## Interpretive Sign: *A Landmark within a Landmark: Moses Prophet Townes*

Moses Prophet Townes (1859–1951) migrated from Virginia to Newburyport and worked for more than 50 years on this site at the historic Wolfe Tavern.

### Location:

At former location of Wolfe Tavern, off sidewalk at corner of State & Harris Streets in the State Street Parking Lot planter.



**MOSES PROPHET TOWNES WORKED FOR DECADES AS A DOORMAN** at Newburyport's grand Wolfe Tavern, and the historic place is now a "landmark within a landmark" due to his long and hard work. Moses Prophet Townes, a former slave of John and Martha Townes, worked for more than 50 years at a doorman for the two parties. Business declined during the Great Depression, however, and the site was demolished the nearby building in 1951 to replace with a parking garage.

Born in Virginia in 1859, Townes was the eldest of seven surviving children. His parents were formerly enslaved farmers, who had come to Newburyport in 1845. As a young child, he witnessed the death of his father who helped him in the first year of the century in the planter in the Great Migration when more than 6 million Black people migrated from the rural South. Townes' father and uncle, Lemuel, William, and Alexander, were enslaved men in Newburyport. Like the Townes siblings, there were 100 of Newburyport's Black residents in the early 20th century were originally from the South.

By 1880, Townes had a a doorman at Wolfe Tavern, where he welcomed guests, collected their carrying bags, and he followed around on a pylon. In 1890, he married church organist and piano teacher Ella Lee (Ella) and they had a son Thomas, who was eventually the city's first Black policeman. Their second child, Cassius, died at an infant.

Over the years, the Newburyport Daily Free published many articles about Townes, characterizing him as "honest and popular" and covering such topics as his work from a slave to a doorman, his job as a doorman, and his membership in various local clubs. In 1910, he was the target of a heated long operation during Prohibition, the bartender had on the side of alcohol. Townes was fined \$100 for possession of alcohol. He was also fined \$100 for possession of alcohol in the tavern.

Townes worked at the Wolfe Tavern until 1951. He was 91 years old when he died at age 91. He was still working 16 hours per week and 10 weeks a year with an annual salary of \$200. In 1951, the last year Wolfe Tavern was open to the public, Mr. Townes died. Among the staff members were one of the organist and Kenneth L. Cousins, uncle of former Cook County Sheriff David Cousins. Mr. Moses Prophet Townes is buried next to his wife in Newburyport's Highland Cemetery on Hill Street.

**A GROOMING WIDOW:**  
Moses P. Townes and Ella, Daughter of Mariah Townes.

**Portrait Captured**  
of the Wolfe Tavern

**A Landmark within a Landmark**  
Moses Prophet Townes (1859–1951) migrated from Virginia to Newburyport and worked for more than 50 years on this site at the historic Wolfe Tavern.

## Newburyport Black History Initiative

Interpretive Sign: *Caroline C. Cottrell – domestic servant in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

Caroline C. Cottrell (1856-1918) like most Black women of this era had few choices but to do domestic work and live away from their families – but saved money, put all her wealth in WWI Liberty War Bonds, and passed it on to her family at the end of her life. Caroline worked for the Morrill family, and raised future Mayor Gayden Morrill.

Location:

Within view of the old Baptist Church (her church, now Mission Oak Grille) off the Green St sidewalk in the grass buffer to the Green Street Parking Lot.



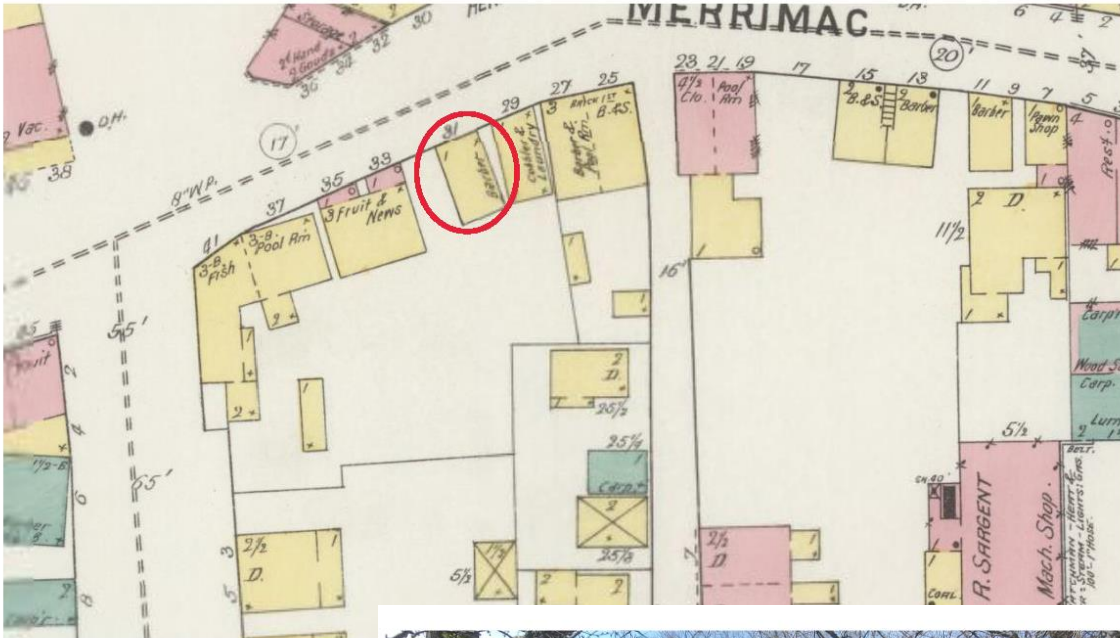
# Newburyport Black History Initiative

## Interpretive Sign: *Black owned Businesses in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Downtown Newburyport*

There was a significant concentration of Black-owned businesses in the area of Water Street, Liberty Street, and Elbow Lane during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that have been largely erased.

### Location:

At former location of John C.H. Young's barber shop off Merrimac Street sidewalk in the grass buffer to the Green Street Parking Lot



(mock-up of sign location)

## Newburyport Black History Initiative

Interpretive Sign: *The Life and Travels of Nancy Gardner Prince (1799-1859)*

Born to a sailor father in Newburyport in 1799, Nancy Prince wrote one of the few surviving autobiographies of a free Black woman in the pre-Civil War United States. Her life story is an extraordinary journey through 19<sup>th</sup> century America including travels by sailing ship to Russia and Jamaica.

Location:

In sight of the Merrimack River and its old wharves in front of the southeast corner of the Firehouse building, off of Railroad Avenue Way and Merrimac Street



(mock-up of sign location)

## Old Hill Burying Ground – bronze plaque marker

There is a small unmarked section of the Old Hill Burying Ground off of Auburn Street near the historic Black neighborhood of 'Guinea' which has a concentration of gravestones from 1783-1889 for Black Newburyporters. A simple bronze plaque on a post is proposed to mark the spot.

