

# Newburyport

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## UNCOVERING THE PAST

TRIO WORKS TO HIGHLIGHT BLACK HISTORY IN THE CITY

**INSIDE**

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From left, Geordie Vining, Kabria Baumgartner and Cynthia Raschke examine a plaque near Newburyport's waterfront, similar to the signs they want to erect around the city to draw attention to the history of Black citizens and culture.



# BRINGING BLACK HISTORY TO LIFE

Initiative aims to tell a more complete story of the city's heritage

When John C.H. Young of Newburyport died on April 21, 1889, at the age of 72, he was loved and respected in the community.

That much is obvious from the inscription on his tombstone in Old Hill Burying Ground, which remembers Young as “a colored man of many virtues. Poor as the poorest, he fed the hungry, clothed the naked and was a father to the fatherless. Kind and obliging to all, he has finished his course and gone to rest. This tablet is erected by his friends.”

But in spite of the fact that he inspired this tribute, not a great deal is known about Young, beyond the fact that he worked as a barber. He shares that obscurity with a host of other Black citizens of Newburyport, whose role in the city's life has rarely been recognized, even though their roots in the community run deep.

In 1820, when the city's population was 6,852, there were 98 Black people living in Newburyport, 40 of whom were children. That made Newburyport the center of Black life in the region, at a time when there were no Black people in Amesbury, two in West Newbury, 10 in Newbury and 15 in Salisbury.

But over the years, a number of local residents have searched for information about these people, so that lives like Young's would not be forgotten. Most recently,

JOHN C. H. YOUNG,  
Hair-Cutting, Curling, & Shaving  
SALOON,  
No. 31 Merrimac St.,  
NEWBURYPORT.  
Particular attention paid to Shaving,  
Hair-Cutting, and Shampooing.  
Hair-Dyeing and Whisker-Color-  
ing done in the best manner.

This image from the Museum of Old Newbury archive shows an advertisement for barber John C.H. Young, one of many Black businessmen in 19th-century Newburyport.

those investigators have included Kabria Baumgartner, of Newburyport; Geordie Vining, of West Newbury; and Cynthia Raschke, of Byfield, who have formed the Newburyport Black History Initiative.

“I'm the instigator of this because a year ago, our church, like a lot of groups in the community, wanted to reexamine what their communities could do with respect to racial justice,” says Raschke, former president of YWCA of Greater Newburyport. “That led me to thinking, what on Earth can Newburyport do? Then it hit me. History. We're known for history. Let's check and see if it's representative.”

Raschke discovered that she was not alone in her focus on this issue when she

By WILL BROADDUS • Photos by MIKE SPRINGER





Indiana Historical Society photo

**Louis Clarkson Tyree, who lived from 1884 to 1963, worked at Wolfe Tavern before eventually attending Harvard Law School.**



Museum of Old Newbury photo

**Charles H. Landers, a driver for Langley's Furniture Company, is shown here in 1900.**



Zinn Education Project photo

**These men are from the 54th Massachusetts Regiment during the Civil War, which included a number of Black volunteers from Newburyport. Black men from the city have served in the armed forces since the Revolution.**

heard Baumgartner, a professor of history and Africana studies at Northeastern University in Boston, give a virtual address at the YWCA's Engaging Communities Luncheon on April 28, 2021.

Titled "Keeping the Stories Alive: Exploring Newburyport's Black Heritage," the talk drew on research that Baumgartner had conducted in archives throughout Essex County.

Starting in August 2019, she and Salem State University professor Elizabeth Duclos-Orsillo searched for documents relating to Black history, eventually publishing their findings in an annotated guide for the National Park Service.

### Marking the spots

In her talk at the YWCA, Baumgartner spoke about a number of figures with

compelling stories that she learned about through this project. These included 19th-century "African Princess" Sarah Baro, of Ipswich, and Nelson Ricks, a 20th-century activist who worked at the Atlantic Coal Company in Newburyport.

Baumgartner also discussed a 34-page guidebook called "Newburyport Black Heritage Trail: Searching for African-American History in Newburyport,"



Geordie Vining, Cynthia Raschke and Kabria Baumgartner visit the grave of John C.H. Young in Old Hill Burying Ground in Newburyport. Young was a barber in Newburyport during the 19th century.

which contained a map and was produced by Rosemarie Greene and Jane Uscilka for Yankee Homecoming in 2002. Raschke saw that as a blueprint for action.

“I thought, eureka, that’s it,” Raschke says. “We’ll just continue the Black Heritage Trail.”

But rather than simply reproducing and adding to the information in Uscilka and Greene’s guidebook, the Black History Initiative wants to place plaques discussing Black history in key spots around Newburyport, where they can be encountered by passersby.

“To have them out here in the everyday landscape is part of what that presentation’s about, so you don’t necessarily have to say, I want to pick up this pamphlet, or I need to go to this museum,” Vining says.

A senior project manager in Newburyport’s Office of Planning and Development, Vining had been doing his own research on Black history when Raschke sent him an email to ask about the possibility of creating interpretive signs.

Vining agreed that plaques would be ideal in spots where all traces of Black history have been erased, such as the parking lot beside *The Daily News* of Newburyport.

“This was part of what used to be called



The eloquent epitaph on John C.H. Young’s tombstone describes him as “a colored man of many virtues.”

Elbow Lane, or Elbow Alley, before it was a parking lot,” Vining says. “You can look back at old 19th-century Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps and you can see the buildings that used to line here and then go back toward Market Square, and there was a particular concentration of homes

and small businesses there, a number of which housed Black Newburyporters.”

Another parking lot, at the public library on State Street, was the site of Wolfe Tavern, where Black doorman Moses Prophet Townes was a fixture. Townes lived from 1859 to 1951 and



Courtesy photo

After the original structure burned in the Great Fire of 1811, the Wolfe Tavern operated on the corner of State and Harris streets from 1814 to 1953. Moses Prophet Townes, who moved from Virginia to Newburyport, worked at the hotel for more than 50 years.

appears in a photograph in *The Daily News* on Nov. 29, 1916, shown in his accustomed role at the front door.

### Educating along the way

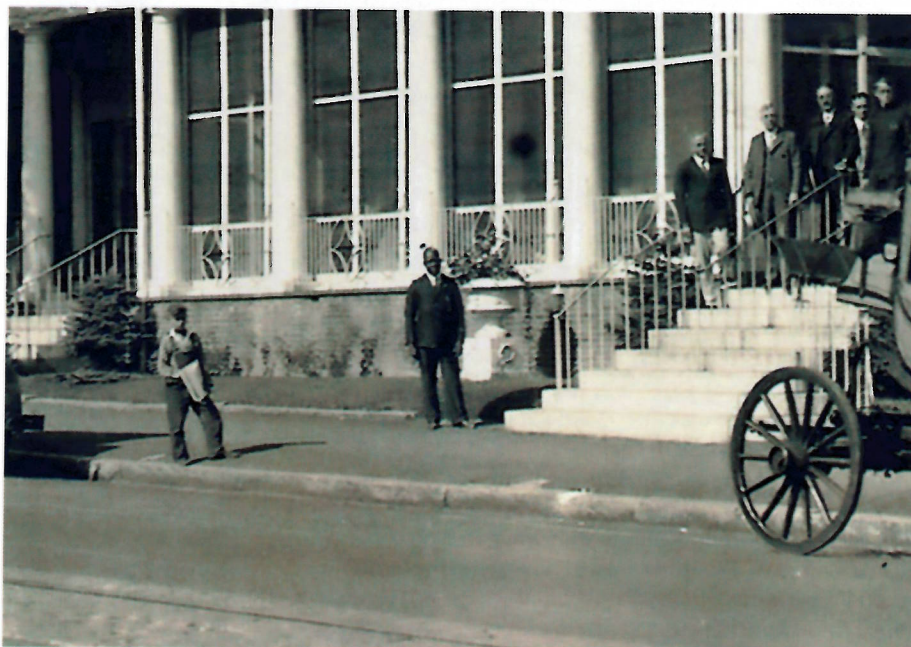
The trio plans to put its first plaque near Guinea Village, which stood where Auburn, Low and Pond streets intersect and was home to most of Newburyport's Black citizens in 1820.

"It was remembered for decades and generations as a particularly vibrant time for that neighborhood, in terms of the number of people who lived there," Vining says. "As the decades and generations went by, people seemed to move to different parts of town and it became less of a center."

Raschke first read about this site at the Clipper Heritage Trail website maintained by celebrated local historian and tour guide Ghlee Woodworth.

A railroad bridge, once known as Guinea Bridge, crossed Low Street in this location, before it was replaced by a pedestrian bridge on the Clipper City Rail Trail.

A sign should be installed there by this summer, where it will not only describe



Museum of Old Newbury photo

Townes stands in front of Wolfe Tavern in 1929. The well-known doorman, who lived on Titcomb Street with his wife, Eliza, was described in a newspaper as "suave and popular."

the history of Guinea Village but also explain the neighborhood's name.

"It refers to the West Coast of Guinea, and back in the 18th century, that was

the center of the West African slave trade, so that there were many different towns and cities in the Northeast, including Newburyport, that referred to



Museum of Old Newbury image

When the *Montana*, built in Newburyport in 1865, left here on its maiden voyage to load cotton in the South after the Civil War, it had an all-Black crew. In the Age of Sail, nearly 1 in 5 sailors were Black.

## Signs of the times

The Newburyport Black History Initiative hopes to install 10 interpretive signs around the city, highlighting:

- ▶ A Black neighborhood in historic Newburyport
- ▶ 18th-century Newburyport Black activists who helped shape the anti-slavery movement
- ▶ The life and travels of Nancy Gardner Prince (1799-1859)
- ▶ The Black girls who sought inclusion in 19th-century Newburyport Public Schools
- ▶ Black mariners during the Age of Sail
- ▶ Black soldiers from Newburyport in the 18th and 19th centuries
- ▶ Black-owned businesses in 19th-century downtown Newburyport
- ▶ Louis Clarkson Tyree (1884-1963) and his pursuit of a higher education in early 20th-century America
- ▶ Moses Prophet Townes (1859-1951) and his 50-year career at the historic Wolfe Tavern
- ▶ How 19th-century studio photography was an empowering act for Black Americans

Black neighborhoods, Black enclaves, as Guinea, or New Guinea,” Vining says.

Vining made a presentation on the project to the Community Preservation Committee in April and requested \$53,000 for nine signs, which the trio hopes will all be in place by the end of the year. They will touch on topics from the pre-Revolutionary era to the early 20th century.

“Part of what our challenge is, is how to focus on all the stories and what is appropriate, and how we can summarize it in an interesting way,” Vining says.

Along with bringing forgotten individuals back to life and evoking a sense of the places where Black people lived, the project wants to describe the impact that Black people have had in their times.

So along with a plaque for Guinea Village and one memorializing Townes and the Wolfe Tavern, Vining says that a sign celebrating Black mariners will be placed along an extension of a multiuse pathway that should eventually pass through what is now the east parking lot on the waterfront.

“There’s a big initiative going on right now to expand the waterfront park, and

as part of that, they’re looking to do a number of interpretive signs about shipbuilding, etc.,” Vining says.

In the presentation he made before the CPC, Vining pointed out that nearly 1 in 5 mariners were Black during the Age of Sail.

“The stories of shipbuilding and the trade and so forth, that has become a big part of Newburyport’s collective identity, and a big part of Newburyport’s history,” Vining says. “The Black history component of that has not been told very much at all. Little bits and pieces.”

They will use the same designers and manufacturers that have created other plaques for the city. There are currently around 20 in place describing features of local history.

### A team effort

The members of the Newburyport Black History Initiative are emphatic about crediting the people whose work they have drawn from to give Black history a vivid presence in the streets of Newburyport.

“What we’re doing, as part of the Black

History Initiative, is by no means novel in terms of researching Black history here," Baumgartner says. "Rather, we're building and expanding on the work of these earlier historians, doing more research, installing interpretative signs, and offering programming and activities."

Along with Greene, Uscilka and Woodworth, these historians include Sharon Spieldenner, Susan Harvey and Clarisse Poirier. Annabelle Svahn, a Newbury resident who is currently a sophomore majoring in history at Williams College, was an intern at the Museum of Old Newbury in January when she produced a valuable research project on Black barbers in Newburyport.

Vining and Baumgartner say that institutions like the Museum of Old Newbury and the Archival Center at the Newburyport Public Library have also been enthusiastic and indispensable partners in the initiative.

But the initiative is also making important new contributions to the stock of available knowledge about Black history. Baumgartner, for example, will include material about Black Election Days in the sign for Guinea Village.

These were events in which Black citizens elected their own leaders. Baumgartner



**Geordie Vining, senior project manager in the Office of Planning and Development, stands near the former site of Guinea Village, where most of the city's 98 Black residents lived in 1820.**

knew these had been held in Salem but discovered during the National Park Service project that they were a feature of Black communities in Lynn, Marblehead, Newburyport, Danvers and Gloucester, as well.

The initiative also plans to address a

19th-century movement by Black school girls from Guinea Village to gain access to public education in the 1820s.

"Apparently, parents, along with the school committee, voted to exclude these girls and all Black children from Newburyport public schools," Baumgartner says.

She wrote an award-winning book, "In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America," that addressed similar efforts in Salem. While the Black students in Newburyport met with initial resistance to their demands for equal treatment, just as in Salem, they eventually prevailed.

"In 1842, or shortly thereafter, Black children were able to enroll in Newburyport public schools," Baumgartner says.

While Newburyport's William Lloyd Garrison eventually became famous for leading the abolitionist movement in the 19th century, the initiative wants to focus on efforts by Black Newburyporters to address injustice on their own, and in their own ways.

This could take the shape of direct petition, as with these young school girls, or in the examples of independence and initiative that so many of them provided with their lives.

"We're centering not on the white men, like Garrison, the white saviors, regardless of how justifiable and worthy they are," Vining says. "But we want to focus on the much-less-known local Black activists who helped shape the whole anti-slavery movement." 🐾

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