

Historical Memory in the Hub: Abolitionism and Civil Rights in Boston

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Since its origins as a Puritan colony in the 17th century, the city of Boston has consistently found itself at the heart of American history. After earning itself the moniker of the “Cradle of Liberty” in the American Revolution, Boston in the antebellum years emerged as the nucleus of a fierce abolitionist movement whose advocacy for ending slavery on moral grounds challenged the status quo and sent ripples throughout the country. More than a century later at the peak of the civil rights movement, the push for racial equality again challenged the nation at its core, leading to tumultuous years of struggle on the way to monumental gains. In Boston, that tumult reached a boiling point with the 1970s busing crisis, as court-ordered busing of students to desegregate public schools elevated racial tensions to an all time high in the city. As Bostonians were engulfed in both a nationwide and local struggle, the city's history as the heart of abolitionism was not a time lost in public memory. Articles in *The Boston Globe* and the African-American newspaper *The Bay State Banner* during the 1960s and 70s, and Boston's antebellum past, including its first clash over school segregation in the mid-19th century, were moments that influenced the population's outlook on the tensions of the time. Though a century apart, these two seminal periods in Boston's history were not separate from one another in public dialogue. As the country and Boston itself reached a boiling point, the city's abolitionist past was a constant theme in how Bostonians faced the civil rights movement, their own racial tensions, and their city's role in the pursuit of racial equality throughout the nation's history.

While the earliest push for abolition in the United States came in the 18th century from the Quakers of Pennsylvania, Boston emerged as the heartbeat of northern abolitionism in the antebellum era and held that reputation through the Civil War. Boston was a city in which merchants profited heavily from the institution of slavery, but both white and black residents challenged the morality of slavery and “agitated Boston, the North, and the whole country to the foundations.”¹ The movement was marked by prominent Bostonians and organizations, which through the printing press, spread their views on the ethics of slavery and racial equality throughout the country. In 1829, David Walker, the son of a slave and a North Carolinian by birth, emerged in Boston as one of the leaders of the General Coloured Association of Massachusetts and published his *Appeal*, which challenged nationwide racism, denounced slaveholders, and called for a slave uprising.² Walker pronounced his claims on moral and Christian grounds, and his advocacy for slave revolt was distressing for Southerners.³ After Walker died in 1830, William Lloyd Garrison stepped into the Bostonian spotlight and soon became one of the most popular abolitionists in American history. Garrison demanded the “immediate freedom for all the slaves, in every state and territory of the Union,” a radical shift from the gradual emancipatory calls of the day.⁴ He favored a peaceful fleeing of the slaves, and his newspaper *The Liberator* sought to morally sway the Northern population, which he hoped would in turn apply pressure on the South.

Garrison’s work served as a “trumpet call” to the black community in Boston, encouraging the black minority in the city to vote and petition to press the government for equal rights.⁵ African Americans in the city formed their own abolition societies, hosted conventions for free blacks, and sent representatives to the 1840 Anti-Slavery Convention in London.⁶ Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most renowned black abolitionist and a powerful orator, found refuge in Massachusetts after

¹ John Daniels, *In Freedom’s Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 30.

² Howard Manly, “A Long Wait,” *The Bay State Banner*, August 3, 2011, <http://www.baystatebanner.com/local11-2011-07-28>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Daniels, *In Freedom’s Birthplace*, 40.

⁵ Ibid., 46

⁶ Daniels, *In Freedom’s Birthplace*, 47.

escaping from slavery in Maryland and became a leader of the New England Anti-Slavery Society.⁷ After news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached Boston on New Year's Day in 1862, Douglass read the document aloud at the Tremont Temple Baptist Church.⁸ By the war's end, the abolitionist fervor of the city had "fully confirmed (Boston) in history as the birthplace of the Negro's freedom."⁹ When the struggle for that freedom reached another apex more than a century later, the city's legacy had not been lost in the annals of history.

At the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Bostonians, like Americans elsewhere around the country, were absorbed in the struggle for racial equality. For many African Americans, this meant a heightened awareness of a black identity in America, and in Boston, translated into a growing interest in Boston's racial and abolitionist history. This shift among African Americans in Boston is apparent in a series of articles from the city's newspapers during the decade. From book reviews on Civil War histories and biographies of Boston's emancipatory advocates to the retelling of impassioned speeches by Garrison and Douglass, the city's last 100 years was certainly on the public's mind—even though the landmark rallies and campaigns were occurring miles away in places like Birmingham, Montgomery, and the nation's capital. One *Globe* article chronicled this "black history renaissance" in Boston.¹⁰ In the article, the assistant director of the Boston Public Library cited a growing rate of reprinting documents from the city's African American history, while Harvard professor Frank Friedel recounted his students' growing interest in local history to help explain "what it means to be a Negro" in Boston.¹¹ The increasing interest went beyond scholarship and academia, as evinced by increased visitation to the American Museum of Negro History in the Charles Street Meeting House "where so many abolitionists once thundered,"¹²

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸ Bob Hayden, "Boston's Black History: New Year's Eve 1862," *The Bay State Banner*, December 27, 1979, 8.

⁹ Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace*, 80.

¹⁰ Robert Taylor, "Now They're Telling it Like It Was...Black History Comes Alive," *The Boston Globe*, July 7, 1968, A1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, A1.

¹² *Ibid.*, A1.

and the erection of a statue honoring Harriet Tubman in 1968.¹³ In Boston, public engagement with issues of race translated into a resurgence of interest in local black history. The frequency of news articles pertaining to Boston's role in abolition and the Civil War showed that the African American population in Boston looked to their city's past as they sought to establish an identity in a fast-changing nation.

A number of articles in the same period went beyond simply retelling a story of Boston's past and instead directly connected that history to present events in the civil rights movement. One 1962 *Globe* article advocated for the preservation of the site of *The Liberator's* first printing, citing it as a "historic treasure in Boston."¹⁴ The article extolled Garrison's life story, concluding that his life's work toward abolition should be remembered, "today as we ponder thoughtfully over the past and up to present-day events."¹⁵ In this light, the article, published the winter following the freedom rides of 1961, was not just about preserving a historic building, but about channeling that building's past to posit Garrison as the precedent set in Boston's commitment to racial equality. Other articles written about Bostonians' actions in relation to the tumult in the South also connected with the city's heritage. A May 1963 story reported on a 10,000-person rally on Boston Common carried out in solidarity with protests occurring at the same time in Alabama. Describing the protests as fighting the "social enslavement" of the Negro, the story told of how marchers in Boston "assembled on the same Common where 100 years earlier the abolitionists rallied for the freedom of the Negro."¹⁶ A few months later, another article by the same journalist reported on a door-to-door campaign of black and white Boston youths to raise awareness of events taking place elsewhere in the country, and quoted the president of the Boston chapter of the NAACP, Kenneth Guscott, as calling the participants "modern day abolitionists."¹⁷ Thus, as tensions of the civil rights movement reached its nationwide

¹³ "South End Square Named for Harriet Tubman," *The Bay State Banner*, September 12, 1968, 3.

¹⁴ John Hatch, "What People Talk About: The Man Garrison and the Liberator," *The Boston Globe*, February 17, 1962, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ Robert L. Levey, "10,000 on Common: Hub Rally Backs Alabama Negroes," *The Boston Globe*, May 13, 1963, 1.

¹⁷ Robert L. Levey, "Door-to-Door Canvass: Freedom Friends Open Equality Drive Today," *The Boston Globe*, November 17, 1963, 61.

climax, memory of Boston's past remained pertinent for the city's residents. Bostonians taking action in the pursuit of racial equality, and those journalists writing about them, were not only cognizant of the history ingrained in the landscape around them, but sought link this past with the vital issues of the present.

Images in the *Globe* also reflected the city's connection of its unique past to current struggles. Portraits of famed abolitionists and historic sites throughout the city accompanied a number of the aforementioned articles on Boston's antebellum and Civil War history. On one page in 1963, a painting of Garrison sat—perhaps intentionally—adjacent to a photo of NAACP president Roy Wilkins. One of the most powerful images demonstrating this connection, however, was one that stood on its own without an accompanying article or caption. In the 12 January, 1964 paper, portraits of John Hancock, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin, labeled “Revolutionary Students,” sat next to the likenesses of Wendell Phillips, Henry Ward Beecher, and Charles Sumner, labeled “The Abolitionists’ Grads.”¹⁸ The pictures painted Boston's history as a logical and continuous progression, portraying the city's revolutionary freedom fighters as having “graduated” into the leaders of the abolitionist era. It presented the city's past as interconnected, embodying a tradition of residents who had continually spoken up and challenged the status quo in the nation. Furthermore, the picture left room for the next reasonable step—for leaders to emerge from Boston in the civil rights movement. It established Boston's legacy as a hub of activity in the country's greatest conflicts, and implicitly implored the city's residents to take the torch from their forbearers in a morally trying time.

While commentary on peaceful protests like marches and freedom rides linked nonviolent action with Bostonians past like Garrison, advocates of the more controversial and militant strands of the civil rights battle also harnessed Boston's abolitionist history. A 1968 *Globe* article by William Worthy, a native Bostonian and civil rights activist, outlined the challenges facing African Americans in Boston, and recalled the peak of revolutionary sentiment in Boston from earlier in the decade. While Garrison and many other abolitionists advocated for peaceful emancipation, Worthy reasoned that there were many similarities between the Boston abolitionists and figures like Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad.¹⁹ Worthy pinpointed a visit by Muhammad to a Roxbury mosque, saying “the antislavery battle cries of Wendell Phillips, William

¹⁸ “The Revolutionary Students, The Abolitionists’ Grads,” *The Boston Globe*, January 12, 1964, A6.

¹⁹ William Worthy, “For the Black Revolutionists...Is this Summer Too Soon?” *The Boston Globe*, April 21, 1968, F6.

Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and Theodore Parker were a match for Muhammad's rhetoric a century later."²⁰ In addition to linking the oratory prowess of the speakers, Worthy cited the Secret Six's support of John Brown and the riots and protests cited by the 1854 arrest of Anthony Burns as embodying an "earlier tradition...largely genteel but often militant."²¹ Worthy thus used Boston's history to cast the city as an unlikely but hospitable home for a growing wave of young and militant activism "that is distinctly ungenteel."²² In Worthy's eyes, Boston's abolitionism was not a separate and static moment in the city's history defined by different principles of peaceful protest and moral suasion. Rather, he saw Boston's antebellum past as a period that was compatible with the revolutionary dialogue of the 1960s and that had poised the city to emerge as a hub for a new surge of action.

Another article published the following month channeled the same abolitionist spirit of Boston toward a more violent and revolutionary approach to the civil rights struggle. The article, titled "White Man in the Black Revolution" was written by actor and civil rights activist Julian Mayfield and chronicled the life and work of Truman Nelson, a Massachusetts novelist and historian. Nelson, a staunch supporter of racial equality, believed that African Americans had the right to revolt under the Declaration of Independence and that even if it took mass violence to accomplish their goals of racial equality, the nation would benefit from it.²³ In his analysis of Nelson as a polarizing figure, Mayfield linked Nelson with the powerful writers and speakers of antebellum Boston, in particular drawing direct connections to the more militant faction of white Boston abolitionists. Mayfield called Nelson a reminder of a time in the city's past of men "who put morality and principle above the law of the land" and a man whose writing was "passionate, for that is Truman Nelson the New Englander, attempting to live by the best moral precepts of his ancestors."²⁴ Nelson, he went on to say, not only embodied the rhetorical strength of the Garrisons and Douglasses, but also channeled the spirit of the Boston men who supported John Brown in his violent actions in Bleeding Kansas "and then gave him a good dinner when he got safely back to New England."²⁵ Thus, Mayfield framed Nelson's stance as carrying on the torch of Boston's past, not just in being outspoken on racial justice, but also in

²⁰ Ibid., F6.

²¹ Ibid., F6.

²² Ibid., F6.

²³ Julian Mayfield, "White Man in the Black Revolution," *The Boston Globe*, May 5, 1968, G24.

²⁴ Ibid., G24.

²⁵ Ibid., G24.

supporting drastic measures to achieve that goal. Like Worthy, Mayfield was an activist who believed the civil rights movement was not going far enough in its actions and demands. For these two Boston writers, their city had not just left a legacy of fighting for equality, but had created a heritage conducive to a racial revolution in America, as well.

While such language eliciting Boston's abolitionist heritage came during the civil rights movement's most tense times nationwide, Boston found itself at the center of the national spotlight in the following decade during the busing crisis of the 1970s. Starting in 1974, Boston was mired in outbursts of violence and protest over court-ordered busing aimed at breaking up "de facto" segregation in public schools.²⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, Boston neighborhoods began self-segregating—the area of South Boston became the "Southie" of Irish Catholic immigrants and their descendants, while African American communities began to concentrate in neighborhoods like Roxbury. As the Irish Catholic demographic grew in numbers and began to seize political power in the city, uneven allocation of funds and resources from the Boston School Committee meant that schools in neighborhoods of Irish ethnic constituents were benefitting more than others. While racial segregation was illegal, students in public schools in African American neighborhoods were not receiving as high quality an education as those in schools in predominantly white, Irish Catholic districts, and African Americans in the city began accusing the city of segregationist practices.²⁷ In response to pressure on the issue, the state legislature passed the Racial Imbalance Act in 1965, which outlawed "any school whose student body was more than 50 percent minority."²⁸ After nine years of inaction upon the ruling, though, the NAACP brought suit of racial discrimination in Boston public schools, and US District Court Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. ruled that the School Committee was guilty of "segregative intent" by establishing a 'dual school system' that deliberately separated black and white students and underfunded black schools.²⁹ Garrity's solution to achieving racial balance in schools required forced busing of students—including between South Boston and Roxbury—leading to the exchange of "students from Boston's most insular Irish Catholic neighborhood with students from the heart of the

²⁶ Edward McGrath, "Rights March Brings Peace Bid: Hub NAACP Seeks End of School Row," *The Boston Globe*, August 30, 1963, 1.

²⁷ Robin W. Lovin and Preston N. Williams, "Rights and Remedies: A Study of Desegregation in Boston," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* Vol. 6, No. 2 (1978): 140.

²⁸ "Busing's Boston Massacre," *Hoover Institution, Policy Review* No. 92, November 1, 1998, <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/7768>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

black ghetto.”³⁰ The response that followed defined a regrettable period of tension, protest, and violence in Boston’s history.

Whites and blacks alike protested the busing order, and for 14 years the Boston public resisted the rule. Many protests from both sides embodied the civil rights resistance of the years before, including marches and demonstrations of civil disobedience. At the same time, racially charged violence raged. Boston Mayor Kevin White compared the city to Belfast, and buses required police escorts to shield black students from hurls of both hateful chants and projectiles.³¹ Fights in schools between black and white students were commonplace daily, and at the height of tensions, 300 state police officers were assigned to South Boston High School.³² As an October 1974 *Globe* article stated, “Boston was supposed to be an enlightened city, the Athens of America. Now our collective conscience is stunned by brutal attacks on children in school buses and on innocent citizens going about their business on our streets.”³³ The court order finally came to an end in 1988, and though violence had considerably subsided for the past few years by that point, only fifteen percent of the public school population was white—the rest had either moved to the suburbs or enrolled in private schools.³⁴ In the fourteen years of forced busing, Boston reached a boiling point and saw its most sobering examples of racial conflict in the city’s history. This, however, was not the first time that African Americans and the Boston School Committee had come into conflict over school segregation.

Between 1835 and 1855—the same years in which abolitionist fervor peaked—a battle between the black community and the Boston School Committee raged just as it would over a century later. In the antebellum North, African Americans possessed their freedom, but in many ways were still a disenfranchised race. In Massachusetts, despite the fact that blacks “enjoyed the right to vote, petition, contract and sue, they were not welcome in the public schools.”³⁵ In 1835, the city opened up the Smith School solely for “children of color,” and within five years of its inception, African Americans in the city began challenging the Boston School Committee and demanding that the right of equal education be given to all children.³⁶ After petitions for the Smith School’s closure were

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Jane M. Hornburger, “Deep are the Roots: Busing in Boston,” *The Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 45, No. 3 (1976): 241.

³⁴ “Busing’s Boston Massacre.”

³⁵ Tony Hill, “Ethnicity and Education: The Politics of Black Education, 1780-1980,” *The Boston Review*, 2007, <http://bostonreview.net/BR06.5/hill.html>.

³⁶ Donald Jacobs, “School Committee Refused Negro Petitions: Boston School Boycotted in 1840’s,” *The Boston Globe*, February 23, 1964: A5.

discarded in 1844, 1846, and 1849, Benjamin Roberts, whose daughter Sarah was forced to walk past five “white” schools to reach the Smith School each day, sued the city and brought the case to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1850.³⁷ Roberts was represented by Charles Sumner (before he was first elected to the Senate), who lambasted the city for perpetuating “caste schools” that violated the sanctity of “equality before the law for all citizens of the commonwealth, regardless of their race or color.”³⁸ Despite Sumner’s efforts, the court ruled that the School Committee had the legal right “to determine in every instance the necessary qualifications for entrance in to the city’s public schools.”³⁹ In 1855, however, a bill was passed in the state legislature that made it illegal to refuse a child entry to a school based on race.⁴⁰ The Smith School closed its doors, and Boston became the first city in the nation to legally desegregate its public schools. Thus, in only a five-year span, the city saw two decisions with massive implications for the future of racial equality in the country. In the Roberts decision, Boston—the hub of abolition—had established the separate but equal doctrine and set the precedent for the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, while the 1855 desegregation order was “one of the most important victories abolitionists scored in the struggle for equal citizenship for free blacks in the antebellum North.”⁴¹ The first of Boston’s two battles for desegregation both added to and challenged its identity as the heart of the antislavery movement. When the “struggle for integration had to be fought all over again” in the 1970s, the legacy of the Smith School, Sarah Roberts, and the spirit of abolitionism entered the conversation once more.⁴²

Despite the ramifications of the *Roberts v. Boston* decision, the struggle for integration in antebellum Boston was generally regarded during the busing crisis as an abolitionist triumph, and in Boston was seized in several ways in the rhetoric of the conflict at hand. From the passing of the Racial Imbalance Act in 1965 to the end of the 1970s, desegregation and the busing crisis was the top of the Boston news, and on numerous occasions, Boston’s 19th century history came up in conversation. In April 1977, the *Globe* twice ran excerpts from a book chronicling the tensions between African Americans and Irish Catholics in Boston, dating back to the antebellum years when Irish immigrant

³⁷ Joseph Harvey, “Boston Had Separate Schools for Negroes More Than Half a Century,” *The Boston Globe*, October 13, 1957: A6.

³⁸ Jacobs, “School Committee Refused Negro Petitions: Boston School Boycotted in 1840’s,” A5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, A5.

⁴⁰ Hill, “Ethnicity and Education.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

laborers saw free blacks as threats to their jobs—and abolitionists saw the Irish as “slovenly and hostile.”⁴³ A December 1978 *Bay State Banner* feature on Garrison and the *Liberator* chose to skim over Garrison’s impassioned advocacy for abolition, and instead focused on his role in fighting for educational equality, including his support of petitions leading up to the 1855 decision. The article described Garrison as a figure that “stood fast for over 30 years in the struggle with Boston’s black citizens to overthrow segregation in the schools.”⁴⁴ Articles like these came at the peak of the Boston busing crisis, demonstrating that in the city’s most tense moments of racial strife in the 20th century, many citizens were cognizant of their city’s struggle with the same questions years before. While that past was widely acknowledged and predominantly viewed in a positive light, how it factored into the conflict at hand garnered differing views.

A number of articles, letters, and columns in the *Globe* harnessed the 1855 integration ruling as an inspirational moment that created a legacy for Bostonians to fulfill in the city’s current crisis. A 1973 letter to the editor from leaders of a number of organizations, including the Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts and the League of Women Voters of Boston, channeled the abolitionists in their imploring of the city to calm its racial tensions. The letter alluded to the 1855 desegregation ruling, saying that the hope was that “in this state, at least, there would be no turning away... from an issue that is so historically ingrained in our traditions.”⁴⁵ The letter went on to label Massachusetts as “the birthplace and nurturing place of the Abolitionists” and ended by asking “men and women in public life to speak out once again, as they have done so eloquently in the past.”⁴⁶ To the writers of the letter, what lived on in memory from Boston’s past struggle with school segregation was not the Roberts decision, but the eventual triumph of Boston’s abolitionists and African Americans. In their eyes, those men and women created a legacy for the city, and the onus was on the current citizens and policy makers to continue the tradition of peacefully campaigning for racial equality. Similarly, a 1977 *Bay State Banner* article retelling the story of antebellum segregation glossed over Sarah Roberts’ plight, and instead wove Boston’s racial history into a logical progression of positive events. The article coined the idea of a “Black Liberation Trail” for the city that

⁴³ Alan Lupo, “Boston — and the early Irish,” *The Boston Globe*, April 10, 1977: A1.

⁴⁴ Bob Hayden, “Boston’s Black History: William Lloyd Garrison,” *The Bay State Banner*, December 7, 1978: 6.

⁴⁵ “Equality in Education is Still Right,” Letter to the Editor, *The Boston Globe*, May 7, 1973: 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

“extends up to the present and will move beyond today.”⁴⁷ Like the letter, this article posited the two cases of school desegregation in Boston’s history as linked events, connecting the 19th century precedent with the present struggle in a way that encouraged Bostonians to continue the work of their forebears. The two pieces did not get bogged down in the devastating consequences of the Roberts decision or the hardships of current racial tensions in the city. Instead, they highlighted the triumphs of Boston in its past battles for racial equality in education, and employed the historical narrative to implore current Bostonians to follow suit.

While inspiration was a common tone of news pieces addressing the mid-19th century struggle for desegregation in Boston, memory of the period also led others to express more outward feelings of shame over Boston’s current hostilities—something paradoxical given the city’s history. One of the city’s most prominent African American figures, US Senator Edward Brooke, expressed this view in a December 1974 letter to the *Globe*. In the letter, Brooke lamented the city’s strife during the holiday season, and said that Bostonians should be “ashamed” given the city’s heritage, which “sadly we seem unable to commit it to our own benefit in our city.”⁴⁸ Another letter a year later from a reader retold Boston’s history of desegregation before asking rhetorically, “Have Bostonians forgotten their heritage?”⁴⁹ The sentiments were not limited solely to Boston residents, either, as a 1975 feature in *The Nation* describing the Roberts case quoted Sumner’s closing statement in the trial before stating, “The Boston School Committee, 125 years later, has a long way to go before it fully absorbs the lesson taught by Charles Sumner.”⁵⁰ Views like these not only expressed the widely felt disappointment in the city’s charged racial atmosphere during the 1970s, but also used Boston’s history to even further augment feelings of shame and disgrace. In light of the city’s past, Bostonians like Brooke and Hoffman saw the city’s ills as paradoxical. Unlike those who seized the city’s previous triumph over school segregation as motivation, though, these writers expressed feelings of shame that their city was failing to uphold the legacy established by its ancestors.

⁴⁷ Bob Hayden, “The History of Desegregation,” *The Bay State Banner*, February 17, 1977: 14.

⁴⁸ Edward Brooke, “Letters to the Editor: Boston Crossroads,” *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 1974: 22.

⁴⁹ Olive L. Hoffman, “Letters to the Editor: Has Boston Forgotten?” *The Boston Globe*, September 22, 1975: 17.

⁵⁰ Maurice Ford, “From Brown to South Boston,” *The Nation*, December 27, 1975: 689.

Another strain of thinking of the time went beyond simply shame, and instead took a critical view of Bostonians for constantly looking to their history in a positive light. Many African Americans were critical of white Bostonians for turning to their city's past as the "Cradle of Liberty" and the heart of abolition, instead of accepting the true struggles of inequality in their midst.⁵¹ Pressure mounted as the passing of the Racial Imbalance Act of 1965 neared, and Boston was beginning to garner national attention. One 1965 *Globe* article, printed after the passing of the act, quoted Whitney Young Jr., the director of the National Urban League, as accusing "Bostonians of resting on the laurels of the abolitionists, of 'living on their past for too long.'"⁵² Nine years later, as the city was nearing its boiling point, *Globe* African American journalist Deckle McLean said for Boston's days as the heart of abolitionism, "those days are long passed."⁵³ For Young and McLean, the memory of Boston's abolitionist history served as a detriment to achieving peace and racial equality in the city. Rather than establishing a legacy to fulfill, as others believed, Boston's past was instead a vessel for denying the gravity of the current struggles against segregation in the city. According to Young and McLean, Boston's abolitionist history engendered in its population a feeling that Boston was immune to the racially charged turmoil going on elsewhere in the nation, a sentiment that impeded the pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the city's struggles.

Though the Roberts case appeared on several occasions in the dialogue surrounding the 20th century desegregation crisis in Boston, seldom was it highlighted as a blemish on the city's prideful racial history. In one 1974 *Globe* article reporting on a teach-in hosted by civil rights marchers at Harvard, the Roberts case was directly used to critique Boston's legacy as a purveyor of racial equality. At the teach-in, prominent figures in the civil rights movement and Boston's black community attacked the city's racial past. Julian Bond, founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and leader of the event, cited the numerous denials of petitions for education equality in Boston in the 1840s and claimed that the calls of whites then and now for defending "the sanctity of the neighborhood school" were merely replacements for "chants and screams of...master-race mythology."⁵⁴ Reverend Vernon Carter, the pastor of All Saints Church in Boston, also

⁵¹ Deckle McLean, "For Black Residents—Contradictions," *The Boston Globe*, June 24, 1973: C66.

⁵² Jean Dietz, "Will Summer Bring Racial Strife Here?" *The Boston Globe*, May 25, 1965: 1.

⁵³ McLean, "For Black Residents—Contradictions," C66.

⁵⁴ John B. Wood, "3,000 Coming for Hub March: Teach-in Decries Violence," *The Boston Globe*, December 14, 1974: 3.

addressed the 3,000 marchers present, claiming, “Some people say Boston has retrogressed. I say Boston has never retrogressed, because it never got anywhere.”⁵⁵ Though the article in no way discredited the views expressed by Bond and Carter, it is interesting that their words were the outliers in the public dialogue surrounding Boston’s previous struggle with segregation. Of all the pieces published in the *Globe* and the *Bay State Banner* mentioning that part of the city’s history, Bond’s and Carter’s critical views of the Roberts case stood alone. The idea that *Roberts v. Boston* tarnished the city’s image and identity appear to not have been widespread among Bostonians in the 20th century. For most Bostonians, the seminal court case was not forgotten but was rather a bump in the road to establishing Boston’s legacy as a leading fighter for racial equality.

As the civil rights movement of the 20th century fought its way through hardships toward racial equality in the United States, the citizens of Boston turned their attention to the past to piece together their city’s role in the nationwide struggle. When freedom riders headed south or when Martin Luther King Jr. led the March on Washington, Bostonians sought out their city’s past as a vessel of understanding, inspiration, and identity. When the busing crisis left Boston “more like the heart of Mississippi than the domain of the 19th century Abolitionists,”⁵⁶ residents again channeled the Garrisons and Sumners, eliciting feelings of pride, shame, and even disgust. In Boston and across the country, the memory of slavery, abolitionism, and all that the Civil War stood for has been—and still is—very much alive and unraveling. When Deval Patrick was elected Massachusetts’ first African American governor in 2007, he swore his oath on a bible that had been given to John Quincy Adams by the African slaves he defended in the *United States v. The Amistad* case in 1841.⁵⁷ In Patrick’s office hangs a painting of former Massachusetts governor John Andrew, who pushed for the creation of the 54th Infantry—the first black regiment in the Civil War.⁵⁸ For Patrick and so many other Bostonians, the city’s legacy as the hub of abolitionism is something ingrained in the city’s landscape. During the civil rights movement and the busing crisis, that history permeated the city’s memory, influencing the outlooks of Bostonians as the nation again underwent a struggle for equality and human rights.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶ Marguerite Del Giudice, “Recovery: The Boston Schools after the Siege,” *The Boston Globe*, May 13, 1979: M6.

⁵⁷ Manly, “A Long Wait.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

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