

ABOLITION & INDUSTRIALIZATION

Springfield, Massachusetts

1830–1870



Map of Springfield, Massachusetts, surveyed and drawn by Marcus Smith and H.A. Jones. Available from [Digital Commonwealth](#).

“Abolition & Industrialization” follows the Black residents of Springfield, Massachusetts, through the decades leading up to the U.S. Civil War and the tumultuous years that followed. The project is organized into a series of modules. Anyone—from middle and high school students to interested residents and scholars—may benefit from the lessons summarized below and available on our website: blackspringfield.weebly.com.

Module #1: The City of Progress

Even as the federal government failed to end and often strengthened slavery, Massachusetts provided some measure of hope to abolitionists. Springfield, the seat of Western Massachusetts and the crossroads of New England, was home to leading abolitionists in the early- to mid-19th century. As early as 1808, residents took up a collection to buy the freedom of an enslaved woman. The *Springfield Republican*, the daily newspaper established in 1824, preached anti-slavery to its readers across New England, while Springfield’s bustling Underground Railroad helped enslaved people escape from bondage.

Module #2: John Brown

Years before the fabled abolitionist John Brown attempted to raid Harpers Ferry and foment an armed uprising, he spent his formative years in Springfield, Massachusetts. From 1846–1849, he developed close relationships with abolitionists. Black residents influenced Brown’s development as a radical thinker and anti-slavery activist. For the first time, he lived alongside many African Americans and even worshipped in a Black church. Not only did Brown first meet Frederick Douglass inside his Springfield home, but he shared his idea for a national slave rebellion while in Springfield. During his short time in Western Massachusetts, John Brown found his mission and his method.

Module #3: Black Community

Springfield’s own Black residents contributed to the abolitionist movement. Many Springfielders resisted the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, taking up collections to buy enslaved peoples’ freedom. Black residents founded churches, settled in small neighborhoods called Hayti and Jamaica, and later volunteered to serve the Union Army as scouts, nurses, and spies. At the same time, Springfield industrialized. The city’s manufacturing centerpiece—the Springfield Armory—became surrounded by paper mills, machine shops, and even a sword factory. But the city’s industrializing trajectory did not always parallel the community’s abolitionist tilt.

Module #4: Black Labor

Springfield’s abolitionist history often clashed with the rapid industrialization of the mid-1800s. Even though Massachusetts abolished slavery as early as 1783, the owners of Springfield’s cotton mills maintained an interest in the enslavement of Black people, and the white community was divided on the abolition of slavery. Despite the growth of local industry, many Black workers could only find menial jobs. Even with this resistance—and the other, often unquestioned practices of discrimination—some Black residents became major property owners, established community service organizations, and continued to join local militant abolitionist groups. Throughout this period, the local Black population—pastors, workers, soldiers—played a critical and enduring role.

About the Project

Writing for the *Valley Advocate*, Chance Viles and Kristin Palpini recently declared that “Springfield’s Black history is nowhere in sight.” Over the past few years, arsonists have attacked Springfield’s Black churches, and the U.S. Department of Justice found chronic use-of-force issues in the city’s police department. Springfield has a compelling history, and it deserves to be told.

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