

Five Cities of the Abolition Movement



Freedom seekers fleeing from Maryland to Delaware by way of the 'Underground Railroad', 1850-1851.
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Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, abolitionism developed as the campaign to end enslavement. While some abolitionists favored gradual legal emancipation, others advocated for immediate freedom. However, all abolitionists worked with one goal in mind: freedom for enslaved Black Americans.

Black and White abolitionists worked tirelessly to create changes in the United States' society. They hid freedom seekers in their homes and businesses. They held meetings in various spaces. And organizations published newspapers in northern cities such as Boston, New York, Rochester, and Philadelphia.

As the United States expanded, abolitionism spread to smaller towns, such as Cleveland, Ohio. Today, many of these meeting places are still standing, while others are marked for their importance by local historical societies.

Boston, Massachusetts

The North Slope of Beacon Hill is home to some of Boston's wealthiest residents.

However, during the 19th century, it was home to a large population of Black Bostonians who were actively involved in abolitionism.

With more than 20 sites in Beacon Hill, Boston's Black Heritage Trail makes up the largest area of pre-Civil War Black-owned structures in the United States.

The African Meeting House, the oldest Black church in the United States, is located in Beacon Hill.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Like Boston, Philadelphia was a hotbed for abolitionism. Free Black Americans in Philadelphia such as Absalom Jones and Richard Allen established the Free African Society of Philadelphia.

The Pennsylvania Abolition Society was also established in Philadelphia.

Religious centers also played a role in the abolitionist movement. Mother Bethel AME Church, another noteworthy place, is the oldest piece of property owned by Black Americans in the United States. Founded by Richard Allen in 1787, the church is still in operation, where visitors can view artifacts from the Underground Railroad, as well as Allen's tomb in the church's basement.

At the Johnson House Historic Site, located in the northwest sector of the city, visitors can learn more about abolitionism and the Underground Railroad by participating in group tours of the home.

New York City, New York

Traveling 90 miles north from Philadelphia on the abolitionist trail, we arrive in New York City. Nineteenth century New York City was not the sprawling metropolis it is today.

Instead, lower Manhattan was the center of commerce, trade, and abolitionism. Neighboring Brooklyn was mostly farmland and home to several Black communities who were involved in the Underground Railroad.

In lower Manhattan, many of the meeting places have been replaced with large office buildings, but are marked by the New York Historical Society for their significance.

However, in Brooklyn, many sites remain including the Hendrick I. Lott House and the Bridge Street Church.

Rochester, New York

Rochester, in northwestern New York state, was a favorite stop along the route that many freedom seekers used to escape to Canada.

Many residents in surrounding towns were part of the Underground Railroad. Leading abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony called Rochester home.

Today, the Susan B. Anthony House, as well as the Rochester Museum & Science Center, highlight the work of Anthony and Douglass through their respective tours.

Cleveland, Ohio

Noteworthy sites and cities of the abolitionist movement were not limited to the East Coast.

Cleveland was also a major station on the Underground Railroad. Known by its code name of "Hope," freedom seekers knew that once they had crossed the Ohio River, traveled through Ripley and reached Cleveland, they were steps closer to freedom.

The Cozad-Bates House was owned by a wealthy abolitionist family who stowed freedom seekers. St. John's Episcopal Church was the last stop on the Underground Railroad before self-liberated individuals took a boat across Lake Erie into Canada.