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Dear Professors,

I am writing to you in regards to your historical work on the black population in Boston during the antebellum era in your book, *Black Bostonians*. I was interested in this topic because I am a high school U.S. history teacher whose courses begin each fall with antebellum America as the focus and the story of free blacks in Boston at this time is something I did not know much about. Thanks to your detailed research and wonderful storytelling, I have a new perspective on the important sub-culture of Boston's black residents in the years preceding the Civil War. Your focus on the neighborhoods, family structure, occupations, education, various associations, and the churches, paints a vibrant picture of an active and important community to the greater Boston community in the pre-war era.

Many of my students know the streets of Boston well as such close residents being only in Quincy and many hold jobs, go to shows, games, etc., in the city quite often. Knowing their knowledge of the area it is exciting for me to have them map out the district of black neighborhoods as you described in the book. To look at the modern day set up of Beacon Hill and have students outline the neighborhoods on the north side of the Statehouse where so many of Boston's black residents called home¹ will spark

¹ Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E., *Black Bostonians*, New York, NY (1979); page2.

excitement and take them to a familiar spot that they can relate to in our exploration of life in this time period. Seeing as how Massachusetts had been without slavery for more than half a century by the outbreak of the Civil War, I had wondered about the numbers of free blacks living in Boston at this time. It was interesting for me to read that at its peak in the antebellum years the black community counted for only 3.1 percent of the city's population². However, though the numbers may have been small, as you stated, the "residential concentration of the relatively small black population distorted the perception of those who passed through the community, making it seem larger than it actually was."³ The respectable area of Beacon Hill was in stark contrast to the evils in the North End where you describe the dock workers and seamen residing in boarding houses, gambling for fun and enjoying themselves in the houses of ill repute. This area was a constant headache to the Boston police and a concern for temperance leaders and missionaries alike.⁴

The images of black neighborhoods in the center of the city filled with multi-family structures (that housed not only family members but boarders as well⁵) living modest, yet busy lives filled with work, church and community participation seem similar to today's urban neighborhoods which are growing less and less distinguished by race. The diversity among the blacks within these neighborhoods that you describe is one my students may not think of because it is not as visible as black and white. The various shades of black you mention, though visible, were not as prominent as the sounds of the communities' diversity. "The clipped tones of British and Canadian English and the

² Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E., *Black Bostonians*, New York, NY (1979); page 2.

³ *Ibid*, page 3.

⁴ Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E., *Black Bostonians*, New York, NY (1979); page 34

⁵ *Ibid*, page 16.

musical strains of West Indian speech were peppered with the brogue of Irish-born blacks and the accents of Spanish, French, and African dialects to lend a cosmopolitan flavor to Boston's black community.”⁶ It would be interesting to have the students look at the population charts you have included to determine birth place and immigration patterns of Boston's black residents at the time and compare them to today.

However diverse the city's black population may have been, “blind to the nuances of color, official records reported only two categories – black and mulatto.”⁷ You go on to talk about how important color was when it came to occupation citing that Boston's mulattoes were more skilled, held more property and were more intermingled with white society than were the darker members of the community.⁸ Occupations for all of the city's black population would have included domestic servants, seamen and dock workers, or other laborer was most common. “To be a hairdresser, a barber, a blacksmith, or a used clothing dealer, the most common skilled or entrepreneurial occupations among blacks, was to be a person of relatively high standing in the community.”⁹ With all of this work available to free blacks in Boston it is interesting to see that many who were skilled workers did not have any more personal property on record than the unskilled workers of the day and the wealthiest black person in antebellum Boston was a servant, Arran Morris, who had a value of \$40,000 in personal property, but it is not clear how he would have had so much when other skilled workers did not.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid, page 6.

⁷ Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E., *Black Bostonians*, New York, NY (1979); page 7.

⁸ Ibid, page 7.

⁹ Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E., *Black Bostonians*, New York, NY (1979); page 8.

¹⁰ Ibid, page 12.

An interesting set of statistics were in regards to the literacy rates of the black Bostonians in the mid-nineteenth century. The literacy rate by the outbreak of war in 1860 was calculated to be ninety-two percent among adults.¹¹ This meant that even if the literacy was really only at an elementary level the community had a way to communicate valuable information to the masses effectively through the broadsides on buildings.¹² This widespread education of the black community of Boston had an important impact on its organizations and social groups that would not have been possible for a less-literate population.

The activism of black Bostonians in the post-Revolutionary era up through the Civil War is remarkable as many fought individually in the courts for their freedoms and then as the words of revolution echoed the sounds of liberty they formed associations to fight for abolition of slavery in Massachusetts. One group that fought to better their situation within the city of Boston after slavery was outlawed was the African Society formed in 1787. This group served as a mutual aid and charity organization and it promoted abstaining from alcohol for all its members as it was believed to be a threat to the community because of the irresponsible behavior it would cause in one who drank it.¹³ The organization worked beyond its attempts at setting a good example for the community, however, and worked tirelessly at the cause of abolition in the early years of the nineteenth century. This early start in community involvement only increased over the years leading up to the Civil War as fraternal groups, intellectual groups, dramatic

¹¹ Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E., *Black Bostonians*, New York, NY (1979); page 12.

¹² Ibid, page 13.

¹³ Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E., *Black Bostonians*, New York, NY (1979); page 28.

and artistic associations, women's groups and so on, that sprouted up to include many of the city's black residents.¹⁴

Church involvement in Boston among black residents was obviously an incredibly important part of their identity and community as you write in your work extensively on the creation of the church in Boston and its role in society. In 1805, the creation of the African Baptist Church in Boston was the first formalized church for blacks and it introduced an important organization for this community to begin to identify with and celebrate. The church meetinghouse served as a location for blacks in Boston to socialize, organize, support one another, fundraise, and expand their influence on the larger community.¹⁵ "The black minister was a natural leader, politically and socially as well as spiritually. The church was a place of worship, a social and cultural center, a political meeting place, and a hiding place for fugitives."¹⁶ Though it carried the name, African Baptist Church, there were many white members who were attracted by the dynamic preachers and this integration gave the church more of a presence in the overall city's culture.¹⁷

The importance of the 54th Massachusetts all black infantry regiment to the African Americans throughout the country has always been something I have stressed with my students with readings and viewing of the movie, *Glory*, but not until I read this work did I truly understand the importance to the free community of blacks in Massachusetts and the pride they felt in this regiment. About forty percent of the black

¹⁴Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E., *Black Bostonians*, New York, NY; page 31.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 40.

¹⁶ Horton and Horton, page 52.

¹⁷ Ibid, page 41.

men in Boston that were of fighting age enlisted.¹⁸ The day of departure for the regiment is described in your book in such vivid detail and the mood of the day becomes almost palpable. “For abolitionists the event marked the beginning of a most important experiment, one which they believed might prove the fitness of black men to fight for the preservation of the nation and for the freedom of their fellows. For blacks, their fitness to fight had already been established in the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Whereas before they had fought for the freedom of the American nation, they would now fight for their own freedom within that nation...this marked the culmination of almost one hundred years of community action.”¹⁹ The importance of this moment for the black community in the North cannot be underestimated, because, though not slaves, they lived in a world of prejudice and segregation and with the departure of this regiment was the hope for positive change and a move toward equality.

As the great Roman statesman and philosopher, Cicero, once said, “Liberty is rendered even more precious by the recollection of servitude.” The life of black Bostonians in the antebellum period was such a unique situation because their freedom, however limited, was within an only partially free society. The awareness of their fellow African Americans in bondage kept in this community appreciative of their liberties. The importance of the social, cultural, occupational and religious strides made by this community in Boston is something I will forever stress to my students. Their bravery and unity in a time of great turmoil is a remarkable part of the fabric of American history.

With deep admiration,

Kristen McCarthy

¹⁸ Horton and Horton, page 127.

¹⁹ Ibid, page 128.