

New Haven's African American Heritage

By Preston Maynard

African Americans have lived in New Haven for more than three centuries. Although few in numbers in the early years of the colony, two hundred blacks lived in New Haven by 1790. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, religious and social institutions were established within the black community. Most notable of these were the black churches.

Since World War II, New Haven's black population has increased greatly. Today the African American community represents 36 percent of the city's population, and the community is well established in the social and cultural life of the city. Numerous sites of special significance to African Americans exist in New Haven.

One of the most important is the Goffe Street Special School. Built in 1864, Goffe School's purpose was to educate black students who, until then, were getting only a rudimentary education. The building was designed by Henry Austin, a well-known local architect. The two-story brick structure with late Federal-style details on Goffe Street now houses the Grand Lodge of Prince Hall Masons.

Another important site is the Hannah Gray Home at 235 Dixwell Avenue. This institution was established in the nineteenth century when Hannah Gray died and left her home to provide housing for "indigent black women." The structure, one of the finest Victorian Gothic houses on the street, was purchased in 1911 and has been recently renovated.

Churches have always been central to the African American community. Although there are many historically notable churches, several churches remain in architecturally significant buildings: St. Paul's Union AME



The Goffe Street Special School

Church on Chapel Street, Varick AME Zion Church on Dixwell Avenue, and St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Whalley Avenue.

A neighborhood site of interest is the Trowbridge Square area in the Hill neighborhood. Trowbridge Square was once known as Mount Pleasant, and was built by an abolitionist to provide housing for poor blacks and whites. The area, modeled after the Nine-Square Plan of New Haven, includes a center square that serves as a green. Small, "reduced" houses surround the square in this unique nineteenth-century affordable housing plan.

A free guide to African American sites in New Haven is available from the New Haven Preservation Trust, 254 College Street, New Haven CT 06510.

Preston Maynard is the Executive Director of the New Haven Preservation Trust.



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