

BLACK HERITAGE TRAIL MARKERS

Slide Show narrative

1	<p>INTRODUCTION</p> <p>It's appropriate to be presenting this project in February, during Black History Month. The observance was established in 1976 by President Gerald Ford, who urged Americans to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history."</p> <p>That's what we're seeking to do as this project seeks to make visible stories that have long existed, but that many people have not encountered in Concord's public spaces.</p>
2	<p>SPONSORS</p> <p>This project is presented by a group of partners already deeply invested in telling Concord's history fully and responsibly.</p> <p>The Robbins House was founded in 2010 to preserve and interpret the homestead of the Robbins family, descendants of Caesar Robbins, a Revolutionary War Patriot. Over more than a decade, it has developed a self-guided walking tour grounded in rigorous scholarship, community knowledge, and ongoing research. As interest in Black history in Concord continues to grow, this project extends that work by bringing existing scholarship into the public landscape.</p> <p>The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee supports this effort because its mission is to surface underrepresented stories that expand Concord's well-known narratives—particularly the history of Black residents and Concord's role in abolition.</p> <p>The Concord Visitor Center has seen strong demand for inclusive programming, including the sold-out Patriots of Color tour. Research shows that feeling safe and welcomed is a top priority for many travelers, and that sense of welcome begins with the stories a place tells.</p> <p>The Economic Vitality Division brings an economic lens. With roughly 60% of sales in Concord's retail districts tied to tourism, and a \$145 billion Black</p>

	<p>travel market, welcoming all Americans is a priority. Inclusive storytelling supports both civic values and long-term economic vitality.</p> <p>Finally, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has made travel and tourism a key focus of its economic agenda, recognizing its power to support jobs, energize our business districts, and nurture quality of life for local residents.</p>
3	<p>CONTEXT: WHY NOW?</p> <p>When we talk about missing pages in American and Concord history, we're not saying that history was forgotten or undocumented. Much of it exists in archives, scholarship, and records. The issue is that some stories were never centered, never made visible, and rarely placed in public space.</p> <p>Concord is exceptionally well documented, yet the experiences of Black residents often appear in footnotes rather than in the landscape people move through every day. What's missing isn't history—it's access.</p> <p>The stories we see shape how we understand who belongs and who helped build a place. When Black history is largely invisible in public space, it can unintentionally suggest those stories are marginal rather than foundational.</p> <p>Visibility changes understanding. It helps residents connect familiar places with fuller narratives and helps visitors see Concord as a community shaped by many people, not just a few well-known figures.</p>
4	<p>GROUNDING IN EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP</p> <p>This project is firmly grounded in existing scholarship—it is not new history and it is not speculative.</p> <p>The foundation is the Robbins House Self-Guided Walking Tour, developed in 2011 and shaped by years of research and community knowledge. That work identified many of the sites and stories that form the basis of this marker project.</p> <p>It also builds on interpretive efforts that bring forward the lives of people such as Ellen Garrison, George Dugan, and the Patriots of Color, whose contributions are often absent from traditional narratives.</p> <p>The Visitor Center has already been making these stories accessible through maps, tours, and programming.</p>

	<p>This project brings this work together and makes it visible in the landscape, allowing people to encounter history where it actually happened.</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>PROJECT DESCRIPTION:</p> <p>This project proposes a set of eight to ten trail markers located along the established Black Heritage Trail.</p> <p>The markers center Black heritage in Concord, including the lives of former Black residents and the town’s abolitionist history.</p> <p>It’s important to be clear about what this project is—and what it is not. These are trail markers, not permanent monuments or historic plaques. They are interpretive, educational, and designed to support learning and exploration.</p> <p>The project is intentionally pilot-scale, modest in scope. The markers are designed as a coordinated set—each tells a specific story while together they form a broader narrative across Concord’s landscape.</p>
<p>6</p>	<p>WHY BLACK HERITAGE VISIBILITY MATTERS</p> <p>Black history is American history, and making it visible matters — for who feels welcome, whose stories are told, and how communities remain relevant in a changing world. Nationally, interest in places that meaningfully interpret Black history is growing, reflected in a \$145 billion Black travel market with strong demand for cultural and heritage experiences.</p> <p>The Black population in the United States and in Massachusetts is growing too, with especially strong growth among multiracial individuals and in regions that historically had smaller Black populations. Locally, however, Concord is one of only three communities in the state to have experienced a decline in its Black population between the 2010 and 2020 Census. This context underscores why making Black history visible in Concord is not only about honoring the past, but about signaling who belongs here today and in the future.</p> <p>Concord’s historic significance is widely recognized. The Black Heritage Trail extends that legacy by responding to the interests and expectations of contemporary</p>

	<p>audiences seeking meaning, context, and relevance in the stories communities choose to tell.</p> <p>The project is grounded in the idea that history matters most when it speaks to the questions people are asking now, when it connects the past to the present, helping people better understand the ideals and ongoing story of our American democracy.</p> <p>While the trail offers benefits to tourism and economic vitality, a deeper impact is the connection of Concord’s past to the present and the invitation to engage history as a living, ongoing conversation.</p>
7	<p>FUNDING</p> <p>This project is funded through a MOTT Destination Capital Grant, with a total project budget of twenty-eight thousand dollars. The grant provides fourteen thousand dollars, matched one-to-one with Town ARPA funds.</p> <p>The funding supports a clearly defined, limited scope focused on design, fabrication, and installation of a small number of trail markers.</p> <p>The grant funds must be encumbered by the end of this fiscal year.</p>
8	<p>SELECTION OF LOCATIONS</p> <p>Location selection is grounded in the existing Concord Black Heritage Trail, first launched in 2011 and reflecting decades of scholarship.</p> <p>Potential sites are evaluated using clear criteria: historical significance, strength of documentation, visibility and accessibility, and how well the site helps people understand history in context.</p> <p>We’re also considering how the sites function as a set. Each needs to stand on its own and together they should offer a collective narrative of Black heritage across Concord.</p> <p>The sites shown next are examples—not final selections—and are shared to illustrate the types of stories this project seeks to elevate.</p>

9	<p>POSSIBLE LOCATIONS: The Great Field</p> <p>In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Great Field was home to a community of Black and Native Concordians who lived and worked on the margins of town life. Families farmed small plots, harvested cranberries, and took on seasonal and skilled labor to support themselves.</p> <p>In 1761, John Jack became Concord’s first Black landowner. Nearby, Caesar Robbins—a Patriot of Color—built a home later occupied by his children, Peter Robbins and Susan Garrison and later his granddaughter, Ellen Garrison, an early civil rights advocate.</p> <p>The Great Field was a close-knit, multigenerational, mixed-race neighborhood. Despite systemic barriers, its residents built community, resilience, and a lasting legacy. By 1875, foreclosure and land speculation erased the neighborhood physically. Today, the site is covered by the Wastewater Treatment Plant, but through research and storytelling, its history continues to inspire today.</p>
10	<p>POSSIBLE LOCATIONS: First Parsh Meeting House (Holy Family Church)</p> <p>On 1841, Frederick Douglass—newly self-emancipated and emerging as a powerful abolitionist voice—delivered a landmark speech at Concord’s Universalist Meeting House during a meeting of the Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Society. He was invited by the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, led by women such as Mary Merrick Brooks, Helen Thoreau, and Susan Garrison.</p> <p>Though abolitionists represented a minority of residents, the event strengthened local and national anti-slavery efforts.</p> <p>This moment connects Concord directly to the national movement for freedom and justice.</p>

<p>11</p>	<p>POSSIBLE LOCATIONS: Old Hill Burying Ground, grave of John Jack</p> <p>John Jack, born in Africa around 1706, was enslaved for much of his life before purchasing his freedom and acquiring land in Concord, making him the first formerly enslaved person to own land in Concord.</p> <p>Jack’s story reflects the broader social and political context of the Revolutionary era. His gravestone bears an epitaph written by Loyalist lawyer Daniel Bliss that draws attention to the tension between ideals of liberty and the continued practice of slavery in colonial America. As one of the few known pre-Revolutionary grave markers for free Black men in North America, it is a rare historical artifact that connects Concord’s local history to the larger national story of the period.</p>
<p>12</p>	<p>POSSIBLE LOCATIONS: Sudbury Road</p> <p>The Francis and Ann Bigelow House is connected to Concord’s role in national anti-slavery networks.</p> <p>In 1850, Shadrach Minkins escaped enslavement after being arrested under the Fugitive Slave Law. Following his rescue in Boston, he passed through Concord, including a stop at the Bigelow home, before reaching freedom in Canada.</p> <p>The surrounding neighborhood illustrates Concord’s connections to the abolitionist movement. Across the street lived Mary Merrick Brooks, a leader of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, and nearby, Franklin Sanborn—one of the individuals later known as the “Secret Six”—operated a small school and maintained ties to John Brown. Together, these associations situate the Bigelow House within a broader network of people and places involved in the anti-slavery movement of the mid-nineteenth century.</p>
	<p>POSSIBLE LOCATIONS: Town Forest</p>

<p>13</p>	<p>Brister Freeman was a formerly enslaved Revolutionary War veteran who purchased land in Walden Woods with another Black veteran.</p> <p>He and his wife, Fenda Freeman, raised a family there, reflecting both the opportunities and limits faced by free Black families in post-Revolutionary Concord. Their story adds depth to the town’s early Black settlement and landownership.</p>
<p>14</p>	<p>ENGAGEMENT</p> <p>The Advisory Team provides guidance to the project, ensuring historical interpretation is purposeful, culturally appropriate, and grounded in scholarship. While the team does not replace formal regulatory or elected decision-making, it plays a key role in supporting and shaping public engagement.</p> <p>Outreach is a central focus including meetings with boards, residents, property owners and property stewards, community leaders and other interested parties. These conversations serve to identify and address community concerns and provide essential input towards refining the details of the project.</p> <p>Over the coming weeks and months we’ll be utilizing a variety of tools to support this engagement including slideshow presentations, walking tours, temporary lawn signs, social media, and local media coverage to extend engagement. In this way, the project is inclusive, transparent, and responsive</p>
<p>15</p>	<p>DESIGNS AND SITES STILL TO BE DETERMINED</p> <p>A central goal of the project is to make visible the stories and people that have long existed in Concord but have often been overlooked or absent from the public landscape. Visibility is not incidental to the design; it is fundamental to its purpose.</p> <p>The design is intended to be fully compatible with Concord’s existing cultural and historic landscape, to engage the landscape in conversation, not compete with it.</p> <p>At this stage, neither the specific sites to pursue nor the marker design have been finalized. Both will be shaped through advisory review, community input, and coordination with property owners and regulators.</p>

	<p>We are actively learning from other communities that have done this work well. Across the region and nationally, modest interpretive markers have been used effectively to make visible underrepresented histories while respecting local context and established design standards.</p> <p>This project’s limited scale allows the Town to test design approaches at a small number of locations, assess public response, and make adjustments as needed. The Select Board and the relevant property owners will retain clear authority over whether and where markers are installed and the length of time they remain in place.</p> <p>Best practices for installations in the public realm guide this project’s structure and oversight. Each marker will be governed by clear agreements that define ownership, maintenance responsibilities, duration of installation, and procedures for modification or removal. Decision-making authority is clearly assigned, with the Select Board and relevant property owners retaining final approval over location, installation, and term. Regulatory review will occur where required, and no marker will be installed without documented consent and defined stewardship. This approach ensures transparency, accountability, and flexibility.</p>
16	<p>DISTINCTION FROM HISTORIC/TERCENTENARY SIGNAGE</p> <p>It is also important to clearly distinguish this project from the tercentenary signage.</p> <p>Those 100-year-old commemorative signs involved different purposes, processes, and challenges, and their review is being handled separately by the Select Board and senior town leadership. That work is outside the scope and direct responsibility of the Black Heritage Trail marker project team.</p> <p>The trail marker project was intentionally structured to address issues that complicated the tercentenary signage, including documented ownership and clear decision-making authority. As interpretive trail markers, these installations are programmatic and educational and are not intended to function as permanent monuments.</p>
17	Questions