



The Museum of Afro-American History

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Photos/video/interviews available upon request

PRESS RELEASE

NANTUCKET 18TH CENTURY HOUSE BUILT BY FREE BLACK WEAVER, SENECA BOSTON AND FATHER OF ABSALOM BOSTON, WHALING CAPTAIN - REMAINS IN FAMILY FOR NEARLY TWO CENTURIES

Museum of Afro-American History announces a find of major historical and architectural significance.

Nantucket, MA - (May 11, 2005) - At a press conference today, Beverly Morgan-Welch, Executive Director of the Museum of Afro-American History, Jack Waite, of John G. Waite Associates, Architects and Frances Karttunen, historian announced the Florence Higginbotham House, located at 29 York Street on the island of Nantucket, adjacent to the African Meeting House, is of major historical and architectural significance.

Recently developed and corroborated evidence revealed the house was built sometime after the property was purchased by Seneca Boston on September 13, 1774. Boston was a weaver and formerly enslaved man who purchased the land a decade before slavery was abolished in Massachusetts. Except for a period of less than one year, the property was owned by African-Americans for the next two centuries. Absalom Boston, the well-known Nantucket whaling captain, was one of the six children of Seneca Boston and his wife, Thankful Micah, a Wampanoag Indian who all lived in the house.

"This new research reveals a story of the incredible legacy of the Boston family who were an integral part of this black community of purpose." Beverly Morgan-Welch said. "What we have found validates the strength, resolution and agency of the black community during the early formation of this nation. The story of the Boston family is full of deep roots and extraordinary accomplishment. We have only just learned of this remarkable family homestead and have already begun to think about a symposium on black life and domesticity."

This stunning information is just the beginning of the research underway by the Museum of Afro-American History. From Seneca Boston to Florence Higginbotham, we know at once that this home is a symbol of the sophistication of a black community, who with great intention and a sense of purpose lived their lives to shape the world. This family was not simply reacting and surviving in this new republic, but put down roots. The stability of the Boston family exemplifies the larger black Nantucket community, that began forming as early as 1710, and tells us that they were not simply reacting to their world, but invested in their futures. This defies

the traditional perception of African Americans before the Revolution.

With a major grant provided by the Community Preservation Committee, the Museum commissioned John G. Waite Associates, Architects to prepare a Historic Structure Report for the Florence Higginbotham House and a Restoration Master Plan for the Nantucket Campus of the Museum of Afro-American History which includes the African Meeting House (1820's). By analyzing all known documentary sources relating to the house's history and conducting a thorough and comprehensive examination of the existing building fabric, the scientific process has resulted in the following findings about the building's history and construction.

- The building is a rare and significant example of a house constructed for a middle-class African-American family in the eighteenth century.
- The house is a good example of Nantucket architectural design and building technology of the period.
- In its present form the house has never been restored. The remaining eighteenth century building fabric has not been adulterated with twentieth century conceptions of the colonial-era.
- With the 1840's and 1930's modifications, the house represents two centuries of occupancy by African-American families on Nantucket.

Simultaneously, Frances Karttunen conducted research on the ownership of 29 York Street revealing that until 1919, the house was owned by descendants of Seneca Boston. In 1920, the property was purchased by Florence Higginbotham, an African-American woman formally trained at the Boston Cooking School. She first came to Nantucket in 1911, purchased this property in 1920 and the African Meeting House in 1933, remaining on the island until her death in 1972. Florence Higginbotham, her son Wilhelm and daughter-in-law, Angeleen Campra saved these precious historic structures and provided the opportunity for the Museum of Afro-American History to share this unique and powerful story with the world. In addition, the Museum received grants from the Tupancy Harris Foundation and the Community Preservation Committee among other donors toward the purchase of the Higginbotham House.

For more information call Tracy Gibbs, 617-725-0022 ext. 21 or e-mail, tgibbs@afroammuseum.org, or visit our website: www.afroammuseum.org

Visit the African Meeting House located at 29 York Street on Nantucket Island. Open to the public **July and August, Tuesday through Saturday, 11am - 3 pm, Sunday 1 - 3pm and off season by appointment.** Free admission and donations are appreciated. For additional information, call Bette Spriggs, Site Manager 508-228-9833.

Visit the Museum of Afro-American History located at 46 Joy Street, Beacon Hill in Boston. Open to the public **year-round, Monday through Saturday, 10am - 4 pm.** Admission is free and donations are appreciated. For additional information call Alex Goldfeld, Visitors Services Manager 617-720-2991 extension 12.

www.afroammuseum.org.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM: The Museum of Afro-American History is New England's largest African American history museum dedicated to preserving, conserving and accurately interpreting the contributions of African Americans. Through exhibits and programs, the Museum highlights the powerful story of community leaders, activists, and ordinary citizens who helped to shape this nation's history from the Colonial Period through the 19th century. The Museum has campuses in Boston and Nantucket that feature the oldest African Meeting Houses in the nation, sites that received the highest designation in historic preservation in 1966, National Historic Landmark. On Nantucket's York Street sits the Florence Higginbotham House next to the African Meeting House (1820's). Adjacent to the African Meeting House (1806) on Boston's Beacon Hill is the Abiel Smith School (1835), the first building in the nation constructed for the sole purpose of housing a black public school, today featuring the Museum's exhibits and Museum Store. The Museum's collections include our historic sites, fine art, photographs, documents, manuscripts, journals, and books, and material culture as well as significant archeology of the free black community on Beacon Hill and Nantucket. The Museum provides Black Heritage Trail® tours with the National Park Service in Boston and the Friends of the African Meeting House on Nantucket.