

West End Museum highlights neighborhood's Black history

By [Laura Crimaldi](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 17, 2024, 7:07 p.m.



Marlon Solomon talked about The Liberty Hotel during a presentation by the West End Museum and the Aframerican Academy. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Long before the city's West End became synonymous with destruction and displacement because of urban renewal efforts in the 1950s, the neighborhood was an epicenter of Black life in Boston and home to the country's oldest standing Black church and the oldest public school for Black children.

The West End Museum highlighted this era from the neighborhood's past on Saturday with a pair of lectures and virtual tour of Black civic and domestic life in the area going back to the 18th and 19th centuries. The event was held in a community room at Hub50House, a residential high-rise constructed as part of the [\\$1.1 billion Hub on Causeway project](#).

During the 1800s, when the West End covered portions of what is now considered Beacon Hill, Black Bostonians built the country's oldest standing Black church at the African Meeting House and Abiel Smith School, the oldest public school for Black children, according to Grace Clipson, the museum's education manager.



By 1860, more than 60 percent of the city's 2,261 Black residents were clustered in the West End and Black leaders in the neighborhood had become prominent figures in the abolitionist movement, said Clipson, quoting research by the sociologist [Adelaide Cromwell](#).

Lolita Parker Jr., who moved to the West End in 1998 and attended Saturday's event, said people who have moved to the area since the recent explosion in development around TD Garden are likely unaware of the neighborhood's long history with Black Bostonians.

“They probably know zero,” said Parker, a longtime community organizer and photographer who had relocated to the West End from Uphams Corner.

The 1851 rescue of Shadrach Minkins, who settled in Boston after escaping slavery in Norfolk, Va., is one story of Black history in the West End that Parker said she cherishes.

On Feb. 15, 1851, Minkins, who worked as a waiter at Cornhill Coffee House and Tavern in Boston, was arrested by federal marshals, who were acting under the authority of the Fugitive Slave Act, according to the National Park Service.

Minkins was the first person in New England to be detained under the law, and his arrest stirred outrage among abolitionists in Boston, the park service said.

They “snatched him out of the courthouse, and . . . put him on some path to so-called freedom,” Parker said.

Minkins escaped to Canada, where he died in 1875, according to the park service.

Leading the rescue mission from the courthouse was Lewis Hayden, who escaped slavery in Lexington, Ky., and moved to Boston, where he became

active in the abolitionist movement; his home on Phillips Street became a stop on the Underground Railroad, according to The West End Museum.

Clipson highlighted his home, which he shared with his wife, Harriet Hayden, during the virtual tour of the neighborhood.



Christina Williams listened to a presentation by the West End Museum and the Aframerican Academy in the West End neighborhood of Boston on Saturday. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

The second lecture was delivered by Marlon Solomon, founder and senior project engineer at Aframerican Academy, a nonprofit organization in Boston. He used the story of the displacement of thousands of families in

the West End during urban renewal as a backdrop to discuss the redlining of predominantly Black neighborhoods in Boston and transit-driven segregation.

The academy Solomon founded is commemorating Black History Month with a series called, Boston Redline 86. The series marks Feb. 1, 1938, the date the federal government issued a map of Boston that sliced the city into different zones based on “residential security,” said Solomon and Mapping Inequality, a project of the University of Richmond.

The US government defined “residential security” as the risk money lenders assumed in granting mortgages, according to the Mapping Inequality project. Areas considered to be safe investments were shaded in the color green and neighborhoods thought to be the riskiest for lenders were colored in red.

The map was a survey of cultural diversity and household earnings, mixing race and class, and was used by the government to plan road projects and influence development, Solomon said.

The federal government provided 90 percent of the funding to US cities to pay for the demolition of neighborhoods that were considered blighted to make way for redevelopment, he said. In Boston, for example, the city paid \$75,000 to level buildings in the West End and South End, Solomon said.

Public transit routes were also modified in ways that made Boston more segregated, he said. The city was “more equitable to get around” when trolleys operated along Boston streets, said Solomon, estimating that a trolley trip from Mattapan to Roslindale Square took about 20 minutes.

After the trolleys were removed from those neighborhoods, the same trip from Mattapan to Roslindale Square required a longer, more circuitous journey across rapid transit and bus lines, he said.

“Why was this done?” Solomon asked. “It was to maintain segregation.”

Tinisha Lahens, 28, of Cambridge, said the history Solomon shared resonated with her.

She has a friend in Mattapan, and when she takes public transit to visit her friend, the trip takes about two hours, she said.

The Mattapan Trolley Lahens takes on the final leg of the journey from Ashmont station in Dorchester “looks like it’s from 1938,” she said.

“It’s like the city is doing this on purpose,” she said. “This is exactly how they feel about the people who live here.”