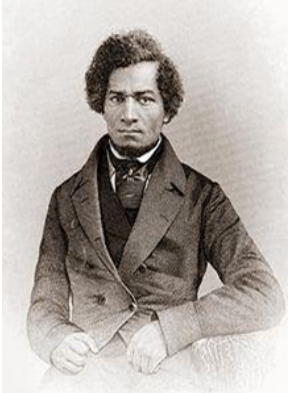


In 1840 Johnson was elected one of five vice presidents of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1847 he was elected president of the 1847 National Convention of Colored People, held at Troy, New York.

A Shelter for Freedom Seekers

Frederick and Anna Douglass

Nathan Johnson's familiarity with the fugitive slave community of New Bedford is also attested by Frederick Douglass's three narratives, which pass to Johnson the credit for his name. Nathan Johnson discouraged Douglass from keeping the surname "Johnson," which he had taken after his escape during his brief stay in New York, because "Johnson" had been assumed by nearly every slave who had arrived in New Bedford from Maryland, and this, much to the annoyance of the original "Johnsons" (of whom there were many) in that place. Douglass's accounts state that Nathan Johnson was reading Sir Walter Scott's verse "Lady of the Lake," whose hero is the Scottish Lord Douglas; the name, with an extra "s" Johnson suggested, became the fugitive's new name. Douglass wrote *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* in 1845.



Frederick Douglass



Anna Douglass

Frederick and Anna Douglass arrived in New Bedford in 1838 and lived here until about 1843. 21 Seventh Street is the first of three residences where the Douglass family lived and the only residence still extant. Three of Douglass's children were born in New Bedford: Rosetta, Lewis Henry, and Frederick Douglass, Jr.

There is documentation that the Johnsons housed several other formerly enslaved individuals at 21 Seventh Street including several who were sent by William Still, noted Pennsylvania Underground Railroad conductor, to Johnson's care.

"I now find that I could have landed in no part of the United States, where I should have found a more striking and gratifying contrast to the condition of the free people of color in Baltimore, than I found in New Bedford. No colored man is truly free in a slaveholding state."
Frederick Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom" (1855)

The Molyneux-Gibson Family

21 Seventh Street was also a temporary home for several women of color sent to antebellum New Bedford to be educated. In 1834 Georgia plantation owner and slaveholder Patrick Gibson brought his concubine Betsey and their daughters Helen and Jane to New Bedford and asked Johnson both to care for them and see to their education. Gibson wanted to spare Betsey and her children the harshness of slavery.

Patrick Gibson corresponded regularly with Johnson and the women, sent money and cloth to them, and visited when he could; his will, according to Betsey Gibson's recollection, would manumit them. When Gibson died unexpectedly three years later, however, his will transferred ownership of the enslaved women to Edmund Molyneux, a business associate and the British consul in Savannah.



Adeline Gibson



Amid a testy correspondence about the women's expenses, Molyneux asked Johnson to bring the Gibson women to Newport that they might be shipped to Jamaica, where they and the rest of their family then still in Georgia would be free.

Margaret Molyneux, a descendant of the Gibson family

Johnson suspected Molyneux intended to re-enslave the women, but upon assurances from Molyneux of his sincerity he ultimately agreed to take the women to Newport. The intervention of white abolitionists suspicious of Molyneux, however, prevented their departure. Receipt of Gibson's will in New Bedford revealed his failure to free them, and the women remained in New Bedford; others of Gibson's large number of slaves settled in the city in the 1850's as well.

Josephine and Clarissa Brown

The Johnsons also took charge of the daughters of self-emancipated William Wells Brown after Brown's divorce in 1847 and his decision to take a job as a lecturer with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Josephine and Clara Brown came to New Bedford that year, and Clara, or Clarissa, was still living at 21 Seventh Street in 1850. The daughters left New Bedford after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act.

Josephine, educated in France and England after 1851, later wrote *Biography of an American Bondman, by His Daughter*, published in Boston in 1856.

William Wells Brown

William Wells Brown was a noted writer and is considered the first African American novelist, dramatist, and travel writer. Born into slavery in 1814, William Wells Brown (1814-1884) escaped at age nineteen, taught himself to read and write, and went on to become a foundational figure of African-American and American literature. In 1847 he published *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*, which sold so many copies that four printings were required in less than two years. After his initial success as an author, Brown achieved a series of firsts.



In 1852 he published *Three Years in Europe*, the first travelogue by an African American; an expanded edition, *The American Fugitive in Europe*, appeared three years later. *Clotel*, or *The President's Daughter*, is the first novel written by an African American.

Published in 1853, it is an imagined history of Thomas Jefferson's black daughters and granddaughters. *The Escape*; or, *A Leap for Freedom* (1858) the first play published by an African American, portrays a slave's escape from the sexual aggression of her white master.

Caroline Harris

On February 21,1861 a young woman of color visited New Bedford's overseers of the poor for some assistance. She told them that her name was Caroline Harris and that she was a widow with a 2-year old child. She had escaped the South in November and had worked her way North through the kindness of strangers. The overseers recorded that Harris and her child were living at 21 Seventh Street with the Johnsons. Harris's story illustrates the number of years the Johnson House was a refuge for freedom seekers.

In New Bedford Douglass found others like Johnson: men and women who actively contested racial discrimination as it presented itself in the North and fought every effort to detach - physically, politically, and spiritually - the nation's free people of color from the millions enslaved in the South.

\$150 REWARD.--Ran away from the subscriber, living in Dorchester county, Eastern Shore of Maryland, about the 1st of May, a NEGRO GIRL, called JANE PENNINGTON, aged about twenty years, of medium height, of a bright chestnut color, and is a neat, delicate looking girl; talks sharp and has a fine voice. She left Tobaccosuck the first of May to visit Baltimore, and has not since been heard of. The probability is she has gone towards New Bedford, as she has a father living there. The above reward will be paid for the return of said girl to me, or in Baltimore jail, so I get her again. **MARY JONES,** Tobaccosuck, Dorchester county. m26 3t*

A small house with a big history

The Nathan and Mary Johnson Properties in New Bedford, MA were designated a National Historic Landmark in 2000 for Frederick Douglass's connection with 21 Seventh Street and for the role its longtime owner, Nathan Johnson, played in Douglass's life, in the antebellum effort to eradicate American slavery, and in assisting enslaved persons escaping from the South. The house is one of a few properties in New Bedford that has won this landmark status.

In New Bedford, both white and black abolitionists had actively helped freedom seekers since at least as early as 1792, and self-emancipated persons came to the city in undetermined but probably high numbers through 1863.

The Nathan and Mary Johnson House is the only remaining building in which Frederick Douglass lived during his years in New Bedford (1838 - 1843) and was an active Underground Railroad hub from 1830-1863.

Through the work of the New Bedford Historical Society, the Nathan and Mary Johnson House has been saved and the exterior restored to its 1850 splendor. The House is a designated site on the *National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom*, the *White House Millennial Trail* and the *New Bedford Black History Trail*.

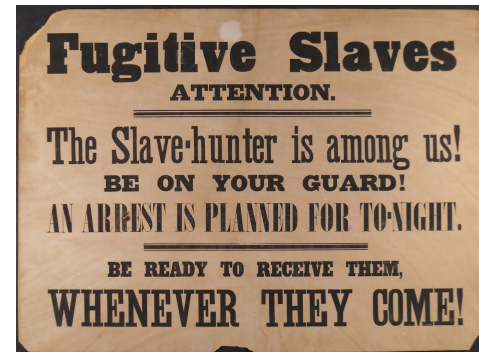
The members of the New Bedford Historical Society are the stewards of the house and acquired the property in December 1998. The Society has worked to preserve and protect the house, restoring the exterior of the building and working to renovate the interior for an educational center on the Underground Railroad in New Bedford and the activities of local abolitionists.

The New Bedford Historical Society was founded in October 1996 and awarded non-profit status in September 1999 dedicated to documenting and celebrating the history, legacy and presence of African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Native Americans, West Indians and other people of color in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Recently the Society was honored with a *Preserve America Stewards Award* by First Lady Michelle Obama for its preservation efforts.

If you are hungry we will feed you; if thirsty we will give you drink; if naked we will clothe you; if sick we will minister to your necessities; if in prison we will visit you; if you need a hiding place from the place of the pursuer we will provide one that even bloodhounds will not find.

Credo of the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1843



National Park Service
Underground
Railroad Network
to Freedom



This pamphlet was funded in part by the
MA Office of Tourism and Travel and
MA Humanities

Photo credits:

Adeline Gibson and Margaret Molyneux courtesy of the
Sanderson Collection of the Bancroft Library

Other images are in the public domain

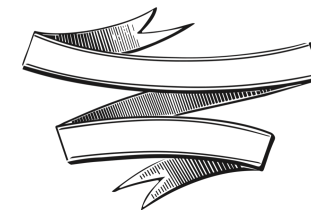
New Bedford Historical Society, Inc.

Nathan and Mary Johnson House
21 Seventh Street
New Bedford, MA 02740
www.nbhistoricalsociety.org
 www.facebook.com/nbhistory
Phone: (508) 979-8828
Email: info@nbhistoricalsociety.org

*Appointments to view the house can be made by
calling the office or checking our website.*

New Bedford Historical Society, Inc.

Nathan and Mary "Polly" Johnson House



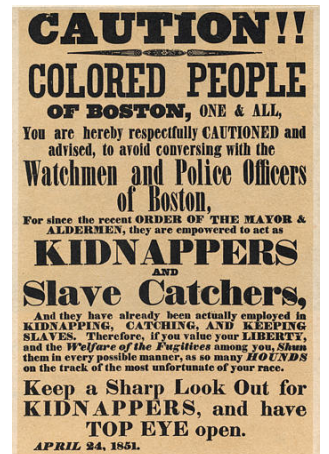
*21 Seventh Street
New Bedford, Massachusetts*

The Johnson House : an Underground Railroad site

From the early years of the 19th century until the onset of the Civil War, the Nathan and Mary Johnson House was an important stop on the Underground Railroad for many freedom seekers who passed through New Bedford on their way to points further north and to freedom.

African-American Entrepreneurs

Nathan and Mary Johnson were prosperous African-American entrepreneurs who were well known for their extensive work in the anti-slavery movement. The couple lived in New Bedford, MA from 1820-1880. The Johnsons ran a well-known confectionary and catering business frequented by New Bedford's wealthiest families. In the 1830's, Nathan Johnson had been partners in a restaurant with Thomas T. Robinson, also a man of color, and had been proprietor of a bathhouse on William Street; in the 1840's he operated a dry goods store on William Street and was part-owner of the whaleship *Draper*. Mary, often called 'Polly', ran their confectionary business and owned two confectionary shops, Polly's Confectionary Shop at 89 Water Street and later a shop at 23 Seventh Street.



Anti-Slavery Activists

By 1850 Johnson was one of the two most affluent men of color in New Bedford and a noted abolitionist. From at least 1832-1847, he was a delegate at several annual anti-slavery conventions of free people of color in Philadelphia.