

Map of the Upper Housatonic African American Heritage Trail

Source: *African American Heritage in the Upper Housatonic Valley*, David Levinson, Editor. (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire, Publishing Group, 2006). p. 28.

African American Heritage Trails: From Boston to the Berkshires

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Abstract: *Walking and driving tours are a compelling means for introducing both students and the general public to local history. This article investigates the creation and content of six African American heritage trails in Massachusetts in Boston, Cambridge, New Bedford, Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, and the Berkshires. These trails document the early existence of slavery in New England as well as overarching themes of activism and achievement. They highlight little-known information and stories of empowerment as well as the familiar topics of slavery and civil rights commonly associated with African American history. The article concludes with an analysis of the challenges and possibilities of using heritage trails to inform both students and the general public about the complex history of African Americans. Anita C. Danker, a former professor of education at Assumption College, is the author of *Multicultural Social Studies: Using Local History in the Classroom* (2005).*

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The cobblestone streets of Nantucket Island and the picturesque back roads of Martha's Vineyard, vacation destinations off the coast of Massachusetts commonly associated with exclusive real estate and quaint seaside charm, are hardly the first places one would think of investigating to learn more about African American history. Nor would one ordinarily think of searching in the peaceful towns of the Upper Housatonic Valley, situated between the Berkshire Hills and Taconic Mountain Range on the Massachusetts/New York border, a region that attracts a summer influx of the well-to-do, drawn to the graceful country inns, sophisticated spas and restaurants, and acclaimed performing arts venues. Yet these locations, along with the cities of Boston, Cambridge, and New Bedford, are keepers and interpreters of important chapters in the African American chronicle. This history is told through a series of heritage trails created in recent decades to celebrate a storied past and to call attention to a presence in Massachusetts that mainstream history has often overlooked.

This study focuses on how and why the trails originated and the information they highlight concerning the presence and participation of African Americans in the activism, arts, economic life, educational institutions, politics, and religious establishments of various communities throughout Massachusetts. It also raises questions related to the fundamental concept of the heritage trail as a means of presenting historical information. Such trails are largely celebratory and seek to showcase a hidden or neglected past; accordingly, they may skirt or ignore content that challenges these goals. Despite this shortcoming, the trails have great potential to educate the general public as well as students at all levels about the history and achievements of various cultural groups, in this case African Americans. With an eye to attracting an audience, the trails' founders and caretakers have created a body of literature, both print and electronic, that is fundamental to understanding the purpose, focus, and story each trail has to tell. Maps, pamphlets, brochures, books, and websites created to publicize and inform visitors, both onsite and virtual, are integral components of the heritage trail package. Consequently, included here is a brief overview, focusing on their formats and content, as part of the analysis. Also included are suggestions of their usefulness to those unable to visit the actual trails in person.

Through both their physical sites and their supplementary data, the trails under consideration develop a number of common strands. They stress a vibrant and empowered heritage that contradicts the themes of victimization and oppression, which until fairly recently were associated with black history in the popular if not the scholarly milieu. As tourist

attractions, the heritage trails add an informative choice to the familiar summer menu of theme parks and beaches as well as an outdoor element not available in most museums. As educational tools, they present both challenges and possibilities. The trails teach local history through the power of place, but, at the same time, their upbeat, positive quality may preclude a critical consideration of questions and controversies surrounding the subjects they highlight. Historically, Massachusetts has been more commonly identified with the Revolutionary War era events and leaders showcased on Boston's immensely popular Freedom Trail. But Absalom Boston of Nantucket, a successful black whaling captain, and Elizabeth Freeman (c. 1744-1829), a slave in Sheffield who sued for her freedom and won, were there, too. Through the medium of the heritage trail, with all its quirks and limitations, these and other accomplished Massachusetts residents of African American ancestry are gradually becoming part of the state's public history. As such, the trails can be effective tools in bringing that history to life for students in the area and beyond.

CREATING THE TRAILS

Founders, site managers, and tour guides associated with the Boston and Nantucket Black Heritage Trails, the Cambridge African American Heritage Trail, the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard, the Black Heritage Trail of New Bedford, and the Upper Housatonic African American Heritage Trail offered a variety of responses when asked about why they selected a heritage trail rather than some other means of preserving and interpreting the diversity of their respective communities.¹ Replies ranged from the practical to the philosophical. Some founders were clearly mindful of the importance of physical space and the benefits of creating a trail over other means of showcasing an African American presence in their town, city, or region. Others were less committed to the concept of the trail to achieve their intended purposes but ultimately chose this option as a means to secure funding or public support. The success of the trails in terms of accessibility and user friendliness is closely tied to the dedication of their creators to the trail concept as well as to the geography of the area in which they are located.

One trail that stands out for its compactness, content, and coherence is the Black Heritage Trail in Boston (BHTB). This 1.6-mile attraction

¹ All interviews were conducted during the summer of 2007 with support from an Assumption College Faculty Development Grant.

follows a designated path and is composed of physical structures that can easily be observed by those who follow it.² The community leaders who founded the Boston Trail in the 1970s were motivated by the fact that many of the structures documenting nineteenth-century African American urban life on the north slope of Beacon Hill were still standing. For this reason, they decided that a trail was a viable way “to connect the dots.”³ The Boston Trail is a registered trademark of the Museum of African American History, an anchor and centerpiece of the trail. Sue Bailey Thurman, a 1960s activist, learned about the history of this and many other buildings eventually incorporated into the trail while conducting research on the neighborhood. Through the efforts of Thurman and other community leaders, a synagogue on Beacon Hill, originally the location of a meeting house built in the early 1800s almost exclusively by black laborers and funded by both black and white residents, was converted into the Museum of African American History. A museum visitor who follows the companion guide will learn the history of a busy neighborhood at a point in time when the activism, education, entrepreneurship, patriotism, and politics of African Americans were powerful forces in reformist Boston.

In contrast to the well-defined Boston Trail is its sister project on Nantucket, a loose collection of sites organized into a trail by its founders for the purposes of putting the island’s own African Meeting House “on the map.”⁴ This structure was purchased in 1989 by the board of the Boston Museum of African American History, which had entered into a partnership with the National Park Service (NPS) in the 1970s. The Boston group viewed the creation of a trail on Nantucket, with the African Meeting House as the centerpiece, as a means of expanding its outreach and showcasing the historic building. After a careful restoration, funded in part with grants from the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the building was reopened to the public in 1999. The Black Heritage Trail Nantucket (BHTN) consists of an eclectic set of sites, some more central than others to highlighting the history of blacks on the island. Some, such as the Whaling Museum and the Dreamland Theater, are located in the downtown area, while others are in the New Guinea neighborhood,

² Museum of African American History official website, <http://www.afroammuseum.org/trailmap.htm>.

³ Alex R. Goldfeld (Director of Operations, Museum of African American History), telephone interview with author, August 16, 2007.

⁴ Helen Seager (Convener, Friends of the African Meeting House on Nantucket, 1991-99), e-mail interview with author, August 3, 2007.

where blacks first settled in the eighteenth century. The geography of the *Nantucket Trail* is far reaching, many sites are unmarked, and brochures are scarce. Tours are only available on Saturday mornings during the summer months. For these reasons, a trail that holds important history is difficult to access, but full of promise.

In contrast to Nantucket's somewhat hidden trail, the Cambridge African American Heritage Trail (CAAHT) is well-marked and carefully researched. With informative signage and excellent companion literature, this sprawling urban trail nonetheless has some serious limitations. This trail owes its existence to the work of a Harvard Divinity School student who was conducting research for his degree and realized serendipitously that there existed a strong and hitherto unpublicized African American presence in the city.⁵ A number of community groups working in concert with the Cambridge City Council decided upon a trail as a viable way to publicize a largely hidden history and to secure funding for markers and publications. The resulting Cambridge Trail consists of twenty scattered sites, each designated with an informative marker. A companion booklet provides an overview of the history of African Americans in Cambridge as well as one-page biographies of the writers, educators, public officials, and religious leaders showcased on the trail.⁶ Despite the helpful markers and literature, the Cambridge Trail is difficult to maneuver as a physical entity. It spans the entire city, so realistically it is not a walking trail. Driving from site to site is also a challenge due to the heavy traffic and lack of available parking. Public transportation is an option, but covering the entire trail would still be a time-consuming and difficult undertaking. For local educators, calling attention to sites that may be in the neighborhood of the school population and using the Cambridge Trail booklet as a catalyst for research might be the best approach to making the most of the trail as a historical resource.

Another trail with rich historical material – as well as geographical challenges – is the ambitious Upper Housatonic Valley African American Heritage Trail (UHVAHT), which spans western Massachusetts and the northwest corner of Connecticut. This trail revolves around sites connected to the boyhood home of W. E. B. Du Bois as well as those of other black activists and leaders in the fields of business, education, military service, religion, entertainment and the arts. The trail originated in the early 2000s,

⁵ Charles M. Sullivan (Executive Director, Cambridge Historical Commission), interview with author, July 9, 2007.

⁶ Cambridge Historical Commission, *African American Heritage Trail: Cambridge, Massachusetts*. (Cambridge, MA: Author, 2000).

when a number of nonprofit groups formally joined forces to inaugurate the venture.⁷ The Upper Housatonic Trail does not have a set of uniform trail markers, and a number of the stops are inaccessible. The founders originally intended simply to create a map of the region with information documenting an African American presence in the area. However, the National Park Service (NPS) advocated for a physical trail in order to be consistent with other similar endeavors throughout the nation. Despite the weight of its administrative structure and the limitations imposed by the length of the route (which spans over sixty miles) and the many unmarked sites, the Upper Housatonic Trail is an active, ongoing project with a strong educational mission and excellent supplementary materials including a full-length companion book that can help teachers develop lessons and activities revolving around the trail.⁸

The Black Heritage Trail of New Bedford (BHTNB) is similar to the Upper Housatonic Trail in its complicated administrative structure and unwieldy geographic range. In this gritty coastal city, there are actually two trails to preserve and disseminate the African American history of the community. One, created under the auspices of the New Bedford Historical Society, is like the trail in Cambridge in that it is scattered throughout the city. Unlike the Cambridge Trail, the New Bedford Trail has neither a uniform set of markers nor an extensive brochure. However, the Historical Society does maintain an informative website with photographs of the various locations, as well as written descriptions of their historical significance.⁹ The trail consists primarily of churches, private dwellings, markers, and monuments documenting the city's diverse past. A second trail, organized by the NPS, is the Underground Railroad Trail (URTNB). It is more focused, compact, and limited in scope than the New Bedford Trail. With less content, this trail is easy to navigate and has the benefit of NPS rangers to interpret the history. There is some overlap with respect to the sites included on the two New Bedford trails, but they are not in competition. The NPS collaborated with the New Bedford Historical Society to develop its trail in fulfillment of a federal mandate under the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1998.¹⁰

⁷ While the trail itself is a project of the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area, a large volunteer and professional effort was involved with support coming from the NPS, the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, Massachusetts Cultural Council, National Endowment for the Arts, and the Berkshire Taconic Foundation. Rachel Fletcher and Frances Jones-Sneed (Co-Chairpersons, Upper Housatonic Valley African American Heritage Trail), interview with author, July 26, 2007.

⁸ David Levinson, ed., *African American Heritage in the Upper Housatonic Valley* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2006).

⁹ See Historic Trails link at <http://www.newbedfordhistory.org/>



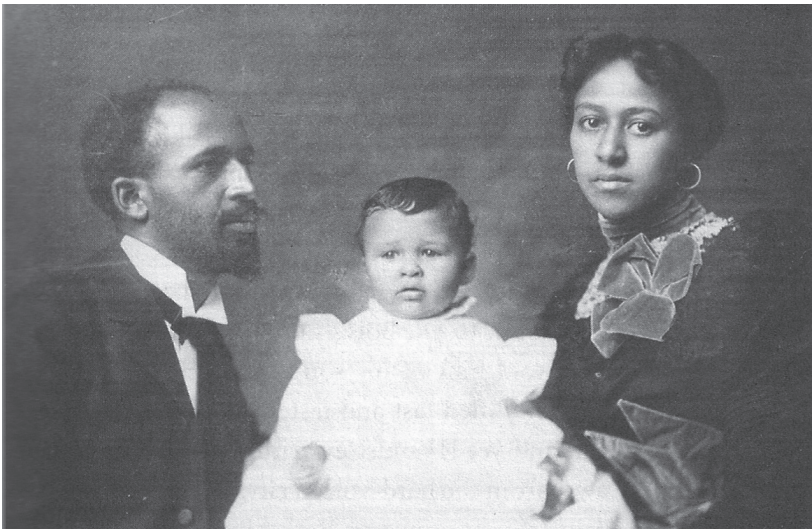
Left: Margaret Alexander Hart, educator, shown here as a teenager in her basketball uniform.

She was the first black graduate of North Adams Normal School (later the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts).

Source: *African American Heritage in the Upper Housatonic Valley*, p. 62.

Below: W. E. B. Du Bois, son Burghardt, and wife Nina in 1898 or 1899 when he was teaching at Wilberforce University.

Source: *African American Heritage in the Upper Housatonic Valley*, p. 133.



Engaging features of the Underground Railroad Trail are that it follows a route similar to the one many escaping slaves traveled, and it includes the house that Frederick Douglass lived in during his early years of freedom.

While the Underground Railroad Trail exemplifies what can be accomplished when the federal government and local institutions collaborate with a common mission, the African American Heritage trail of Martha's Vineyard (AAHTMV) stands alone as a testament to the efforts of a single teacher, her students, and a handful of local residents to uncover and disseminate a history of slavery and activism on their tiny piece of exclusive real estate. A native of Ireland, teacher Elaine Cawley Weintraub was dismayed to discover that her Martha's Vineyard students knew almost nothing about the history of blacks in their own community. So she embarked on a research project with her class that led her to a partnership with Carrie Camillo Tankard, a New Jersey transplant and NAACP activist. Together with some interested residents, they created one of the most visible and widely recognized of the Massachusetts African American heritage trails.¹¹ Because young students have been actively engaged in the research, maintenance, and publicity throughout the process, the Martha's Vineyard Trail has a strong educational mission. The trail comprises a collection of stops that span the entire island and includes sites that both document slavery on the island and highlight African American achievements. Due to its geographic range, the trail is not a walking tour; individual and group tours can be arranged through the trail's website.¹² The results are well worth the effort, for the Martha's Vineyard Trail winds through a charming locale and showcases important and interesting historical material about black sea captains, preachers, authors, and politicians as well as escaping slaves and other legendary residents.

To sum up, the founders and keepers of the African American Heritage trails that frame the eastern and western borders of Massachusetts articulate a variety of reasons for having decided on this type of venue for calling attention to the state's black history. They are united in their commitment to making visible, through their use of buildings, homes, parks, markers, businesses, churches, and other structures, a history that previously was largely invisible to students and the general public.

¹⁰ Frank Barrows (Park Ranger, New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park), interview with author, August 12, 2007.

¹¹ Elaine Cawley Weintraub (Chairperson, African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard), interview with author, August 20, 2007.

¹² <http://www.mvheritagetrail.org/>

THE STORIES THEY TELL

The primary mission of each of the trails was to reclaim a lost or neglected history of African Americans in Massachusetts.¹³ The founders in almost every case sought to document the existence of slavery in a state it is not usually associated with, while at the same time emphasizing the activism and achievements of blacks rather than their victimization. The Black Heritage Trail in Boston is a case in point. Anyone familiar with the city today knows that Beacon Hill is both the seat of the state government and one of its most exclusive residential neighborhoods. What is not so widely known is the story of two nineteenth-century black community leaders, Lewis and Harriet Hayden, whose courage and daring changed many lives when they lived at 66 Phillips Street, one of the most captivating sites on the Boston Trail.

A former slave who came to Boston by way of Canada and Detroit, Lewis Hayden started a successful clothing business and, with his wife Harriet, established his home as a stop on the Underground Railroad.¹⁴ In addition to the numerous freedom seekers who passed through their dwelling, such notables as Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Brown were said to have visited there. The NPS tour includes a spirited story about how the Haydens warned authorities seeking fugitive slaves that they stored gunpowder under their front steps, which they would threaten to ignite on the spot rather than surrender any of their houseguests. After the Civil War, Lewis Hayden served in the Massachusetts legislature and Harriet Hayden established a Harvard Medical School scholarship for students of color.

Across the Charles River, in the city of Cambridge, the founders of the Cambridge Trail have likewise rescued a little known black presence in their community. One individual they highlight is Patrick H. Raymond. The son of a runaway slave from Virginia who moved his family to Cambridge in the mid 1840s, Raymond worked as a journalist for two Boston newspapers before joining the Union navy in 1862.¹⁵ After returning from the war, he continued to work in the newspaper business, becoming

¹³ Two full length studies of the African American presence in New England are Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780 – 1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) and William D. Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

¹⁴ James Oliver Horton & Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1999).

the editor of a community weekly. Later he received an appointment to oversee the Cambridge Fire Department, which expanded considerably under his leadership. He was the first known black fire chief in the nation. Engine Company Number 5 was later named in his honor.¹⁶ His presence on the Cambridge Trail is a quiet reminder that African Americans served their communities and the nation at large in important capacities; these contributions were not all that unusual for whites in the nineteenth century, but for blacks, due to the challenges of institutionalized discrimination, they were extraordinary.

While the Haydens of Boston and Patrick Raymond of Cambridge are heritage trail honorees who remind us of neglected history, the sites in New Bedford emphasize the work of the widely celebrated Frederick Douglass. The chapter in his remarkable life and career that unfolded in New Bedford began in 1838 when local resident Joseph Ricketson met Douglass and his wife Anna and brought them to his son's Union Street home.¹⁷ From there they moved to a house on Seventh Street owned by black caterers and activists, Nathan and Mary Johnson. Douglass soon became involved in the local abolitionist movement, making speeches at Liberty Hall where other noted leaders of the cause, including William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, also spoke out against slavery.¹⁸ The sites are all stops on the Underground Railroad Trail and allow visitors to follow in the footsteps of one of the nation's foremost reformers of the nineteenth century.

In addition to the themes of activism and reclaimed history, the role of African Americans in the economic life of Massachusetts is a common topic highlighted on the heritage trails. On the Upper Housatonic Trail, numerous black entrepreneurs and professionals are included. One such individual was Warren H. Davis, a Great Barrington lumber dealer and land speculator who helped civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) obtain his family home and arranged with local workers to restore the property.¹⁹ The Martha's Vineyard Trail similarly includes enterprising blacks who found ways to serve the African American community and prosper in the process. One site, the Shearer Cottage, was the first

¹⁵ Cambridge Historical Commission, *African American Heritage Trail*.

¹⁶ City of Cambridge Fire Department, "About Us," *Engine 5*, <http://www.cambridgema.gov/CFC/engine5.cfm>.

¹⁷ *The Underground Railroad: New Bedford*, National Park Service Pamphlet.

¹⁸ A comprehensive account of the role of New Bedford in the abolitionist movement is Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Levinson, *African American Heritage*, 1 – 14.

guesthouse on the island owned and operated by blacks. Catering to an African American clientele, the establishment attracted such guests as Congressman Adam Clayton Powell and entertainers Ethel Waters and Paul Robeson.²⁰

Two additional frequent themes on the various trails are education and religion. Schools and individuals who made breakthroughs despite many obstacles are highlighted to remind visitors of past discrimination as well as resolve on the part of African Americans to gain access to the knowledge and skills necessary to fashion a better life. The Phillips School on Boston's Black Heritage Trail was the first in the city to be integrated, while the Abiel Smith School, another site on the route, was a segregated institution created by white businessmen who endowed it to help educate African American children. The nearby African Meeting House incorporates the dual subjects of education and religion. It may well be the oldest surviving black church building in the United States. In addition to serving as a place of worship, the structure also housed a school for black children during the days of segregation.²¹ Nantucket's trail has its own African Meeting House as well as the downtown Unitarian Church, the site of speeches by both Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. The trail on Martha's Vineyard cites two churches for their service to black congregations, a criterion that led the creators of the trail in the Upper Housatonic Valley to include a number of houses of worship among their sites.

Overall, the trails portray African American residents of Massachusetts as individuals who – despite legal and social obstacles – worshipped, went to school, and made a living much like many others. What differentiates the African American community is the fact that so many of its members on the islands, in the selected cities, and in the valley were powerful agents in nineteenth century abolitionism, the Underground Railroad network, and the later civil rights movement.

REACHING TARGET AUDIENCES

When asked to identify their intended audiences, the majority of trail founders and officials emphasized the local community. They seemed far less concerned about attracting outsiders and vacationers to the sites than in making residents aware of hidden histories in their own backyards.

²⁰ Elaine Cawley Weintraub, *Lighting the Trail: The African-American Heritage of Martha's Vineyard* (Martha's Vineyard, author, 2005).

²¹ Museum of African American History, "Black Heritage Trail," <http://www.afroammuseum.org>.

In Cambridge, the creators of the Cambridge Trail noted that the city's population was relatively transient, and they expressed concern that those whose tenancy was short-lived might be unaware of the ongoing diversity of the community. Consequently, they hoped that the information about African American leaders displayed on the neighborhood markers would catch the attention of such residents going about their daily business. By contrast, officials associated with the trails in Boston and New Bedford were more concerned about outreach, and they had the advantage of partnerships with the NPS, which, by its very presence, can alert locals to the history surrounding them and also arrange and conduct tours for outsiders. Trail leaders on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard also articulated a dual mission. They recognized that as tourist destinations, their locales had the potential to educate vacationers about a little-known history, but they were equally committed to spreading the word among permanent residents and have found local newspapers particularly helpful in this regard.²²

All founders and caretakers stressed the need to attract teachers and students, but they were well aware of the many obstacles preventing the effective use of their trails in the classroom curriculum. In Boston, due to the winding streets and traffic congestion, the trail is not safe for elementary school groups. However, the Museum of African American History does offer a number of educational programs for younger children as well as those for more advanced students who can walk the Boston Trail with their teachers and NPS rangers.²³ The trail in the Upper Housatonic Valley is also largely inaccessible for school groups, but the advisory council regularly sponsors and publicizes educational events to call attention to the region's African American heritage. The only trail to have institutionalized its educational mission is the one on Martha's Vineyard, which began in part as a project at Martha's Vineyard Regional High School and continues on as a component of the tenth-grade social studies curriculum. Each year, new groups of students collect data, and enhance and maintain the trail.

With so many target audiences – local residents, tourists, students, and educators – the question of how best to reach them remains a challenge for the keepers of the various trails. One outreach mechanism all the trails utilize is the Internet. Each maintains an informative website with helpful information, such as site descriptions, maps, upcoming special events, and resources for educators. Still, getting people to the Internet site in the first

²² An example is Eleni Collins, "History with a Passion," *Martha's Vineyard Times*, February 22, 2007.

²³ See the Educators link under the Plan a Visit heading at <http://www.afroammuseum.org>.

place can be a challenge. An interested party will most likely learn about a particular trail first from a local newspaper article or tourist pamphlet, or by word of mouth, and then turn to the Internet to learn more. Teachers, on the other hand, may serendipitously come upon a heritage trail website when seeking resources for lesson plans or student projects on African American history.

Websites tend to be inefficient in initially attracting potential visitors to heritage trails, but pamphlets and maps – especially when placed at strategic sites such as tourist information centers, libraries, museums, or other public venues – are probably more effective. In this regard, those trails with connections to the NPS have an advantage. The Boston and New Bedford trails offer free, instructive fold-out pamphlets to stimulate the interest of tourists and educators, and they can be found at visitors' centers in these communities. The recently published *African American Heritage in the Upper Housatonic Valley Trail Guide* is another excellent resource; it has an informative introduction and a user-friendly map with a key to accessible and inaccessible sites as well as colorful photos and descriptive text. A free downloadable version can be found at the trail's website.²⁴ Educators who cannot take their classes on field trips can use such materials to design lessons on African Americans and their activities in New England.

As cited earlier, the Upper Housatonic Trail has also published a full-length, hardcover book, edited by David Levinson, with details about the individuals showcased on the many sites that comprise its route. In addition, the book includes sections about each of the communities through which the trail winds. Less comprehensive and more whimsical than the Upper Housatonic Trail companion book is Elaine Cawley Weintraub's self-published *Lighting the Trail: The African-American Heritage of Martha's Vineyard*. Her work includes essays, photos, and sketches as well as related student artwork and poetry. The island's bookstores carry this paperback, and the author attributes much of the success of the trail in attracting tourists to the popularity of the publication. Proceeds are used to fund maintenance of the trail. Though more costly than the Internet, the full-length books provide in-depth information, and their purchase supports the trails as well.

²⁴ See Trail Guide link at <http://www.uhvafamhtrail.org>

EDUCATIONAL MISSION: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

Education is a paramount goal of each of the trails, and they clearly deliver in this regard, particularly with respect to instructing the general public. As an educational tool for teachers and scholars, though, they do have their limitations. As their names imply, the trails celebrate African American or black heritage. This is both a strength and a weakness. Historian Michael Kammen writes: “Heritage is comprised of those aspects of history that we cherish and affirm. As an alternative to history, heritage accentuates the positive but sifts away what is problematic.”²⁵

A case in point is the treatment of the more controversial aspects of the life and perspective of civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois. Several sites on the Upper Housatonic Valley trail revolve around Du Bois as a force in western Massachusetts, where he was born and lived for a number of years. Specific among them are his boyhood home, the cemetery where a number of his relatives are buried, and a downtown mural. Both the Upper Housatonic Trail website and the companion book contain entries emphasizing Du Bois’ life, work, and legacy. These stress his educational achievements, his role in the founding of the NAACP, and his research and writings. However, the more controversial features of Du Bois’ later years, such as his rejection of the United States and his attraction to Communism, are given little attention. Likewise, the Cambridge trail glosses over these subjects by noting on his marker: “In 1961, Du Bois moved to Accra, Ghana, at the invitation of its president, Kwame Nkrumah. He died there on August 27, 1963, at the age of ninety-five, and received a state funeral.”²⁶ While both trails celebrate the legacy of a powerful leader in American race relations and black activism, they skirt the complexity of Du Bois’ personality and the development of his thought, particularly with regard to how the United States of the mid-twentieth century was dealing with one of the most serious issues of the era. By their very nature, heritage trails accentuate largely positive accomplishments, and it may be unrealistic to expect them to devote much space in their limited texts, markers, and Internet sites to complex facets of their subjects, particularly those that do not align with their upbeat missions. Educators who use such trails then have a responsibility to fill in the gaps and provide opportunities for

²⁵ Michael Kammen, “History is Our Heritage: The Past in Contemporary American Culture,” in *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, eds., Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 138 – 156 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 147.

²⁶ Cambridge Historical Commission, “W. E. B. Du Bois,” *African American Heritage Trail*, n.p.

their students to conduct further research. However, more casual tourists or residents, who are not students of the material presented on the trails, may take away inaccurate impressions of the subjects highlighted in the content.

A more practical obstacle to the widespread use of the trails as on-site educational tools involves accessibility. While those in Boston and New Bedford, associated with the National Park Service, are true walking trails with guided tours provided on a regular schedule, those in Cambridge and the Upper Housatonic Valley were not really designed to be used by walkers or tourists. The island trails are also too spread out to be accessed by walkers, but teachers can make arrangements for private bus tours with prearranged stops. Such field trips are not easy to plan and finance given the realities of today's school budgets. Hence the attraction of teaching subject matter through the power of place, a principal goal of educators seeking to tap into local history to address curriculum topics, remains elusive.²⁷ Realistically, the creators of the more difficult to navigate trails hope to educate the public largely through the strategic placement of markers that might catch the eye of a passerby and by means of informative literature and maps. Those involved in the Cambridge trail have developed a curriculum for teachers, but they have found it difficult to implement in the public schools on a regular basis.²⁸ Such efforts help disseminate information, but they cannot supply that firsthand experiential component that can be so exciting to young students.

Walking in the footsteps of Frederick Douglass or sitting in a schoolroom that was part of Boston's long struggle to provide equal educational opportunity to black children are encounters that can connect the past to the present, sparking the curiosity of young learners in ways that print and electronic media cannot. That being said, most of the sites on the various trails are not in themselves particularly interesting. With notable exceptions, such as the 54th Regiment Memorial in Boston and the Whaling Museum in Nantucket, the brick buildings, clapboard homes, and empty meeting houses comprising the bulk of the trails' sites can only appeal to school children when they come alive through the stories they hold. For this reason, the role of the informative tour guide or the knowledgeable teacher

²⁷ Anita C. Danker, *Multicultural Social Studies: Using Local History in the Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2005.

²⁸ Kathleen Rawlins (Assistant Director, Cambridge Historical Commission), interview with author, July 9, 2007.

is critical to the effectiveness of even the most compact and accessible of the trails if they are to be truly enriching curriculum resources.

Despite some issues of selective content and accessibility, the trails do offer unique possibilities for stimulating interest, connecting the past to the present, and documenting the presence of both slavery and civil rights activism in a state not commonly associated with these historical themes. Moreover, the trails shed light on the everyday life, artistic and educational accomplishments, and entrepreneurial spirit of a major cultural group. The geographic reach of the heritage trails, from the coastal islands and eastern cities to the hills of the state's western border, along with the vast time period spanned by their content, from colonial days to the contemporary era, are evidence of a vibrant African American presence that has not been vigorously highlighted in the past. The future challenges for the keepers of the trails involve providing more effective methods of publicizing their existence, updating literature and websites to ensure historical accuracy, and, wherever possible, finding ways of making them more convenient for educators, students, residents, and tourists to use and enjoy. These are not insignificant tasks, but the potential of the trails for sparking interest and using physical space to teach, learn, and appreciate local history far outweighs any obstacles to meeting the challenges.

HJM

TWENTY DOLLARS REWARD.
RUN away from the subscriber in October last, a Negro Wench named ZIL, about 15 years old, small of her age, pretends she is free, she has been heard of she was going to Lenox. Whoever will return her to her master shall receive the above reward; or if any person will send word or inform her master so that he can get her again, shall be well rewarded for their trouble.
 REUBEN HOPKINS.
 Sharon, January 25, 1779.

A runaway slave ad for “a Negro Wench named Zil.”

Her Connecticut owner thought she had escaped to Lenox, MA.

Source: *African American Heritage in the Upper Housatonic Valley*, p. 214.