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The African-American Business Tradition in Boston

by Robert C. Hayden

This essay is adapted from articles previously published in the Boston Minority Business News (22 April 1994) and The Bay State Banner.

African Americans in Boston have been exhibiting their interest and talents in business for a long time. Those in business today are continuing a tradition that goes back to the African culture of preslavery days. Enslaved Africans who were brought to America came from a business tradition, from a culture of great traders, merchants, and craftsmen. Many enslaved blacks, in fact, purchased their freedom by marketing their skilled services and handmade products.

Early Black Enterprise

It is both little known and historically ironic that blacks were extensively involved in skilled crafts and scientific and technological developments in Massachusetts both prior to and following the Civil War. The famous black educator Booker T. Washington, who founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881, perceived this clearly. He felt the nation was making a mistake to exploit the cheaper labor of immigrants over that of the skilled black artisans and business people.

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Who were the forerunners of today's African-American entrepreneurs? As early as 1730, former slave Stephen Jackson was a prosperous hat maker in Boston. Paul Cuffe of Westport, Massachusetts, was successful in shipping and trading ventures between America and Canada, Europe and the Caribbean from 1778 to 1810. Robert H. Carter, the first black person registered as a licensed pharmacist in Massachusetts (1886), owned and operated five different drugstores in Boston and New Bedford between 1870 and 1903. Free and enslaved blacks made contributions to economic development as shipbuilders and sail makers, manufacturers of shoes and clothing, bricks and lumber, furniture makers, wrought-iron and silver craftsmen, store owners, caterers and restaurant operators, and hotel and livery stable owners.

The extensive use of leather for belts, bags, harnesses, saddles, and boots during the 1700s and 1800s made the tanner an important businessman-craftsman. Black men operated large businesses for retail leather products.



Prince Hall of Boston, freed by his owners in 1770, used the trade he acquired under slavery—leather dressing—to supply soldiers with leather goods during the revolutionary war.

Black coopers (barrel makers) in Massachusetts continued to play an important role after leaving the plantation. In 1768, a slave-artisan named Exeter made and repaired wooden barrels in Merrimac, Massachusetts, where they were used by almost every household for storing salted fish and meat, the staples of the colonial diet. For many years, the blacksmith was one of the most important artisans in the colonial villages where he did more than just shoe horses. The need for metal articles was so great that he was expected to make practically anything from iron.

Black women had been responsible for most of the sewing needs on the plantation—sewing new clothes for the other slaves each year as well as for the mistress. Eliza Ann Gardner, a black woman who was famous for her needlework, was a mantua maker in Boston. She learned the trade of dressmaking as a young woman and did the delicate needlework for the first banner made for the Plymouth Rock Lodge of Odd Fellows. Her home in Boston served as both a dressmaking shop and a station for the Underground Railroad.

Industrial and economic progress was made by blacks during the post-revolutionary war period in Boston. In the trades, there were a leather craftsman, a house builder, a grain measurer, a soap maker, and a boot maker. Barbers, for the most part, were black. There were thirty-two hairdressers, most of whom owned their own shops. In addition, there were fourteen clothing stores, four tailor shops, four boarding houses, and a general store—all owned by blacks. Census data for Boston after the Civil War indicate that there were skilled, entrepreneurial blacks working as printers, dry good store operators, engravers, caterers, jewelers, restaurant owners, grocers,

fruitstand owners, and cigar makers. Of the 197 black businesses in existence in Boston in 1900, 70 were in the wholesale or retail trade, 107 were in service, and 20 were in other lines of work (printers, landlords, newspaper publishers, and a banker).

The Twentieth Century

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the number of black businesses began to decline. This lack of growth and failure of some of Boston's black businesses was not the result of a small black population to serve as potential customers for, in fact, Boston's black businesses had always depended on white customers. The decline was caused by increasing competition from white immigrant groups, an insufficient supply of capital, and an increase in white prejudice and discrimination during the 1890s as "Jim Crowism" began creeping into the North.

During the first two decades of the 1900s, the typical black business proprietorships in Boston were grocery, fuel, dry goods, hardware, stationery, tobacco, and candy sales. Frequently, a small restaurant or real estate business was also part of such an establishment. The black community did not have many specialized businesses that could compete with similar ones owned by whites. By offering a diverse range of products, black proprietors were able to manage comfortable profits.

One of the purposes of African-American history should be to keep themes from the historical heritage in the forefront . . .

Small lunchrooms and restaurants were plentiful during the early 1900s. There were no black-owned drinking establishments because the Licensing Board did not readily issue licenses to blacks. There were several lodging houses that styled themselves after hotels. Two good-sized livery stables were also operating—one connected with a large black funeral business in the South End and the other owned by Henry C. Turner in the Fenway district. Turner's clientele were mostly white. A building he constructed in 1900 was used for his boarding stable and garage. In downtown Boston, a photographic studio and a school of pharmacy were owned and operated by blacks.

Four notable businesses operating between 1890 and 1910 were those of J. H. Lewis, Joseph Lee, Gilbert Harris, and William Monroe Trotter. In 1885, J. H. Lewis was making a living as a tailor in a back-street room. He suddenly gained a reputation for "bell trousers," the fashion of the day. With increased profits, he moved his shop to larger quarters on Washington Street in the downtown business section of Boston. Lewis built an extensive clientele of mostly white customers and most of his employees were also white. Joseph Lee built a large catering business in Boston on Boylston Street in the Back Bay where he enjoyed a large, wealthy patronage. During the summer, he took his culinary skills to the

South Shore where he owned and operated the Squantum Inn, a fashionable summer resort. Lee owned two restaurants in Boston before buying the Woodland Park Hotel in Newton which he owned for seventeen years. In his restaurants and Newton hotel, the majority of Lee's patrons and employees were white.

The largest wig manufacturer in New England at the start of the twentieth century was Gilbert C. Harris. Arriving in Boston in 1876, he worked in a hair making shop for fourteen years before striking out on his own. With \$178 he became a traveling salesman selling hair goods door-to-door. He once recalled that his cash receipts for the first three weeks amounted to ten cents. With \$38 in capital, Harris started his own hair products store. His big break in profits came when he began selling wigs to the theater world. He gained large orders from the Globe Theater and supplied all the wigs to the Castle Square and Bowdoin Square theatrical stock companies. He eventually launched a mail-order business and by 1910 his business was the largest of its kind in New England.

William Monroe Trotter started his newspaper business in 1901, largely to voice his militant equal rights stand for black Americans and his opposition to Booker T. Washington's more conservative race relations posture. His newspaper, *The Guardian*, was a solid success for nearly twenty years. Today, Trotter's publishing tradition continues with publisher Melvin Miller's *The Bay State Banner*, established in 1965.

Cooperative enterprises were started in Boston in the late 1800s and early 1900s. One of the most notable was the Colored Cooperative Publishing Company led by Walter Wallace, located at 232 West Canton Street. It published the *Colored American Magazine*, a popular publication of art, science, literature, and business with a national readership of blacks and whites. One could become a member with an investment of five dollars. In 1917, Boston's NAACP established a cooperative grocery store with \$5,000 in capital.

In 1919, a retail and wholesale grocery and provision store, Goode, Dunson & Henry, situated on Shawmut Avenue in the heart of the black community, had grown from a small beginning into a specialized business which competed successfully with similar white businesses. It survived by providing services to both white and black area residents. Through its wholesale department it supplied many of the smaller, black-owned neighborhood grocery stores. Jesse Goode, a partner in the grocery firm, also had a real estate firm. In 1910, Jesse Goode Associates held a dozen pieces of property assessed at \$70,000. Goode's realty firm was financed from investments made by twenty black waiters who pooled their small weekly savings to create the Goode Realty Trust. This was an early example of a business cooperative formed on a large scale by blacks in Boston.

The National Negro Business League was founded in 1900, at the urging of Washington, in response to the need for an organization to provide a way for black business people to come together to offer each other support,

consultation, and information. When the NBL held its diamond anniversary convention in Boston in 1975, it honored Estella V. Crosby, chairperson of the National Negro Business League convention held in Boston during the 1950s. Mrs. Crosby operated her own beauty shop for years at the same time she ran a retail store on Tremont Street, then the hub of black business enterprise in Boston. Mrs. Crosby began her work as a beautician in Boston's West End where she fixed hair for whites and blacks. She later moved to Tremont Street in the South End where she ran a dry goods store that also did business with whites and blacks.

During the early 1900s, Tremont Street was the principal street for black activity. The Eureka Cooperative Bank located at 930 Tremont Street was the only bank in the East owned and operated by blacks. Thomas E. Lucas ran the Southern Dining Room on Tremont Street known for its good food and prompt, attentive service. From 1923 to 1970, the South End Electric Company on Tremont Street was a pioneering business in Boston's black community. Its founder and president-treasurer was Leon G. Lomax. South End Electric did electrical contracting, house wiring, and repairing. It wired most of the homes in Roxbury when people changed from gas lighting to electricity.

Lomax studied at the Coyne School of Electricity and Northeastern University after arriving in Boston in 1920. He received a master electrician's license from the state but could not gain admission to the all-white union. So he started out on his own in 1923. His first big contract for \$1,800 was for wiring the halls of the Jesse Goode Realty Trust. In 1940, South End Electric became the dealer for Kelvinator electrical refrigerators in Roxbury. It eventually began to sell washing machines, electric ranges, radios, and the first television sets in the community. Major appliances could be purchased in installments as part of the customer's electric bill. South End Electric was the first black-owned business to join the Boston Chamber of Commerce. In 1938, Lomax also organized the Greater Boston Negro Trade Association.

Business and Community Efforts toward Economic Empowerment

A historical review of black businesses in Boston can not overlook three community action-oriented attempts at economic empowerment from the late 1960s to the early 1970s—CIRCLE, Inc. (Centralized Investments to Revitalized Community Living Effectively), Freedom Industries, and Unity Bank.

CIRCLE tried to stop the flow of black capital from the community. Unity Bank, the Contractor's Association of Boston, and other business groups, along with nonprofit community agencies, sought to establish a central purchasing and computer information system for all agencies to use. While these goals were never realized, federal grants from the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity did result in the establishment of community organizations whose purpose was to develop educational programs and activities that would give attention to the

interrelationship of jobs, housing, education, and business development.

Freedom Industries (FI) was started in 1968 by attorney Archie Williams who had been active in CIRCLE. FI was designed to recirculate its profits through the black community. It was comprised of a series of interlocking businesses that included electronic assembly, graphics and advertising, and a chain of supermarkets. Freedom Foods started operating in 1968 in an old Stop and Shop supermarket. Freedom Electronics began assembly of electronic equipment in 1968. Freedom Industries was intended to be a tool to generate and operate new businesses, make fiscal and technical resources available to people establishing new businesses, provide venture capital, and develop new ideas for other community-controlled, profit-making businesses.

Just about the time Freedom Industries was getting started, Unity Bank—the first major twentieth-century black-owned bank in Boston—came into being. It opened in 1968 with assets over \$1.2 million, 70 percent of which was raised in the black community. Within two years, Unity had assets worth \$19 million. In 1971, however, Unity went into receivership after extensive loans threatened its capital; the bank eventually closed. But, this was not the end of black-owned and operated commercial banks in Boston. A group of entrepreneurs later formed the Boston Bank of Commerce which assumed the deposits of Unity and purchased its branches.

The seven principles of Kwanza can be seen in all of our long-lived, successful African-American enterprises . . .

Incorporated on June 30, 1982, with Juan M. Cofield as its leading founder and president from 1982–83, Boston Bank of Commerce is the only fully insured black-owned and operated bank in Boston and New England. A successor to Unity Bank and Trust, the Boston Bank of Commerce is unique in its outreach and service to religious, academic, social service, and health and human service agencies and organizations. Under the leadership of Ronald A. Homer, who became president and chief executive officer in June 1983, a winning investment strategy has resulted in an annual growth rate of 30 percent.

Coming Together

The Greater Roxbury Chamber of Commerce was established in August 1990 with the mission to provide service to the minority business community through programs designed to promote economic development, communicate business information, and foster community involvement. This was not the first time that African-American businesses in Boston had come together. In July 1969, under the leadership of Josephine Holly (owner of La Parisienne Beauty Salon), the Roxbury Businessmen's Development Corporation (RBDC) was founded. RBDC was formed so that the small businessmen and women

could effect solutions to problems and control their own destinies. Between 1969 and 1971, RBDC sponsored seminars, workshops, and courses for small business people, contracted with the Department of Labor to promote training for young people, developed anticrime programs, and provided work sites for college students and the Model Cities Summer Youth Works. In 1972, RBDC published the *Directory of Black Businesses and Professionals* listing 378 firms and professionals (doctors, dentists, lawyers, and accountants).

RBDC later developed into the Roxbury Chamber of Commerce (RCC), with over one hundred members, and began sponsoring the annual Roxbury parade, reviving the old Roxbury Historical Society goal of promoting Roxbury as a good place to do business. A similar group was founded in 1973—the Black Corporate Presidents of New England, Inc. (BCPNE), a group of black manufacturers concerned about barriers to business opportunities for blacks. Today BCPNE represents a regional constituency and the interest of some five thousand black-owned manufacturing and service industries in the New England region.

The Future

One of the purposes of African-American history should be to keep themes from the historical heritage in the forefront to continue, in this case, a strong African-American business tradition: one is the notion of family-owned businesses; the other is embedded in the seven principles of Kwanza, an African-American celebration meaning “first fruits of the harvest” in Swahili. The seven principles of Kwanza can be seen in all of our long-lived, successful African-American enterprises, both past and present. They are: *unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith*. These principles guided the entrepreneurs of the past and will continue to provide direction for the future. Strength to meet the challenges of the future will be gained by these Kwanza principles and knowing, celebrating, and using the landscape of the past.

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