In 2017, the Rhode Island Historical Society, in partnership with the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, was awarded a grant from the National Park Service for a multi-phase project on African Americans' struggle for civil rights in Rhode Island: The 20th Century. The project consisted of conducting archival research, collecting oral histories, and documenting places of significance to civil rights in Rhode Island.

This collection of banners tells the story of African heritage civil rights in Rhode Island. Although the project focus is on the 20th Century, no story is complete without understanding its history. The struggle for freedom and equal rights for those of African heritage in Rhode Island began with the arrival of the first enslaved peoples from Africa.

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The first documented slave ship to arrive in the Colony of Rhode Island was the “Sea Flower” in 1696. Previously, Rhode Island enacted a law abolishing ‘negro slavery’ in 1652, but that law was largely unenforced. Despite this and the 1663 Royal Charter promoting religious freedom and toleration, colonists continued their involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and in the ownership of enslaved Africans. This continued into the 18th century when enslaved Africans outnumbered white indentured servants in the colony almost eight to one. Even when Rhode Island passed the Gradual Abolition Act in 1784 and outlawed the slave trade in 1787, many found ways to circumvent the laws with little to no consequences.

1652 Rhode Island enacts a law abolishing slavery stating, “Whereas, there is common course practiced amongst English men to buy negers, to that end they may have them for service or slaves forever; for the preventinge of such practices among us, let it be ordered, that no black mankinde or white being forced by covenant bond, or otherwise, to serve any man or his assighnes longer than ten yeares, or untill the come to bee twentie four years of age, if they bee taken under fourteen, from the time of their cominge within the liberties of this Collonie.” The law is largely unenforced.

1663 Royal Charter promotes religious freedom and toleration by stating, “to hold forth a lively experiment, that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best bee maintained, and that among our English(subjects) with a full libertie in religious concernments; and that true pietye rightly grounded upon gospell principles, will give the best and greatest security to soveraignetye, and will lay in the hearts of men the strongest obligations to true loyaltye.”

1776 Reverend Samuel Hopkins of Newport publishes “A Dialogue, Concerning the Slavery of the Africans: Shewing it to be the Duty and Interest of the American Colonies to Emancipate All Their African Slaves”
In 1780, four years before the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted a gradual emancipation law, a group of free African men assembled in Newport to organize and charter America’s first mutual aid society for Africans known as the African Benevolent Society and later the Free African Union Society. The Society’s lofty mission, set the stage for the promotion of the rights of Africans to social freedom and equality, including providing funds for indigent families, a burial society (Palls and Biers) to ensure proper burials, setting moral and ethical standards for public conduct within the larger community, and most importantly, raising consciousness and funds within the African heritage community to someday return to their native Africa. In addition, the Free African Union Society established one of the nation’s earliest free African private schools organized, supervised, and taught by fellow Africans. Other such benevolent societies were formed and followed suit.

1784 Rhode Island enacted a law granting the gradual emancipation of slaves

1787 The Hiram Lodge No.3 is chartered in Providence, which became the second African heritage Lodge of Freemasonry in America.

1808 Members of the African Benevolent Society, founded in Newport and later called the Free African Union Society, organized the earliest African operated private school in America.
Two race riots destroyed African Heritage neighborhoods in Providence, in Hard Scrabble in 1824 and in Snowtown in 1831, demonstrating the end of slavery wasn’t the end of discriminatory treatment. Despite this, members of the African heritage community continued to organize and fight for civil rights. After the Dorr Rebellion, voting rights were extended to non-landowners regardless of race in the new state constitution. This new legal precedent allowed African heritage men to participate in local and national conventions. It also resulted in widespread celebrations throughout the African heritage communities in Rhode Island.

As a result of the Dorr Rebellion, the Rhode Island State Constitution was revised and ratified in 1842 giving African heritage men, among others, the right to vote, but not Native American men.


1850 Starting in Roger Williams Park and later at Rocky Point and Crescent Park, the Rhode Island African heritage community came together annually to celebrate the British and later American Slavery Emancipations.
In 1883 the United States Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional and asserted that the Fourteenth Amendment forbade states, but not citizens, from discriminating. In answer to this, the African heritage community in Rhode Island moved to preserve their hard-fought civil rights within the state. Led by Rev. Mahlon Van Horne and George T. Downing, the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted a law that secured all persons within the State their civil rights. In a second major federal setback to African heritage civil rights, the United States Supreme Court in 1896 issued Plessy v. Ferguson, the ruling decided that “separate but equal” facilities satisfied the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees. Rhode Island African heritage and white leaders responded immediately by enacting General Law, Chapter 277 “that all persons within the jurisdiction of this state shall be entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of any place of public accommodation, resort or amusement.” The 19th century ended with the preservation of new and dynamic civil rights for African heritage Rhode Island citizens, but the dawn of the 20th century brought a new age, marked by two world wars that redefined the fight for civil rights through access to fair employment and housing practices.

1866 - 1896

1866 Led by George T. Downing, the integration of public schools in Rhode Island is enacted stating, “In deciding upon applications for admission to any school in this State, maintained wholly or in part at the public expense, no distinction shall be made on account of the race or color of the applicant.”

1872 Rev. Mahlon Van Home becomes the first African heritage person elected to a Rhode Island public school board in Newport and in 1885, is elected to the General Assembly of Rhode Island.

1885 Led by Rev. Mahlon Van Home and George T. Downing, the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted a law that secured all persons within the State their civil rights declaring “no person within the jurisdiction of this state shall be debarred from the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of any place of public accommodation, resort or amusement.”

1896 The National Association of Colored Women Clubs is organized in Washington, DC. Newport businesswoman, Mary Dickerson, organized a Rhode Island chapter and the Women’s League, Newport, R.I. The organization participated in a major political campaign advocating for Anti-Lynching Laws.
At the conclusion of the 19th century, African heritage Rhode Island men and women prepared for the new century by forming a new brand of civic organizations that organized around the power of collective political action. World War I became a transformative moment for America. It propelled our still young nation into a worldwide conflict and required an unprecedented national mobilization of troops and supplies. By 1918, all Americans were asked to sacrifice for the war effort. During the course of the war, 350,000 African heritage men and women served in practically every branch of military service. The troops of color returned to their hometowns, cities, and states with high expectations of equality, employment, and respect. In its place they faced an unprecedented increase in racial tensions across America that led to the eruption of race riots across three dozen cities during the summer of 1919, which historians today refer to as "The Red Summer."

1917
Over 1,800 African heritage citizens participated in the Negro Silent Protest Parade in Providence. The silent march was organized by the NAACP, church, and community leaders from Newport, Providence, and Boston to protest violence and lynchings directed toward African heritage citizens across the country.

1918
During WW1, Mary E. Jackson of Providence, an ardent worker in the Women's Suffrage Movement, was appointed as Special Field Worker Among Colored Girls under the NAACP.

1906
John C. Minkins became editor-in-chief of the Providence News-Democrat, the first African heritage editor of a white-owned newspaper. He was an active member of the NAACP and became a national lecturer on issues of race relations in America.

1913
The Providence Branch National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was organized by prominent civil rights attorney Joseph G. LeCount, Dr. Julius Robinson was the first President.

During WW1, Mary E. Jackson of Providence, an ardent worker in the Women's Suffrage Movement, was appointed as Special Field Worker Among Colored Girls under the NAACP.
World War II was the next major transformative event in American and Rhode Island history. As in the previous war, Rhode Island mobilized men, women, and resources to prepare for the largest war in human history. In 1939, as Rhode Island braced for possible conflict, the Providence Urban League organized under the leadership of James N. Williams. Many of the organizers of the Urban League in Rhode Island were veteran members of the NAACP and saw the Urban League as a means to secure fair employment rights. Led by the NAACP’s Joseph LeCount and the Urban League’s James Williams, the State of Rhode Island in 1943 published a landmark report entitled, “Report of the Commission on the Employment Problems of the Negro.” This report, which included scores of documented evidence of employment discrimination faced by African heritage Rhode Island citizens across the state, directly led to enactment of the Fair Employment Practices Act in 1949.

1939 the Providence Urban League is organized under the leadership of James N. Williams.

1944 Civil rights attorney Joseph LeCount and John F. Lopez, President of the Providence Branch NAACP joined Thurgood Marshall in successfully bringing suit against the Boilermakers Union to enable over 500 African American men to equally work as union members at the Kaiser Shipyard in Providence.

1947 the Rhode Island Council for Fair Employment Practices is organized. Leaders included Senator John Fitzgerald of Newport, James Williams of the Providence Urban League, and Joseph LaCount of the Providence NAACP.

Rhode Island enacted the Fair Employment Practices Act in 1949 that declared "to foster the employment of all individuals in this state in accordance with their fullest capacities, regardless of their race or color, religion, or country of ancestral origin, and to safeguard their right to obtain and hold employment without such discrimination."
With the conclusion of WWII, veterans returned to America with hopes of securing good jobs and good housing opportunities as they led a new era of prosperity in post war America. The Housing Act of 1949 was a landmark, sweeping expansion of the federal role in the construction of public housing. The Act also provided federal funding for slum clearance programs associated with urban renewal projects in American cities. This law propelled the issue of fair housing into the center stage of civil rights efforts nationally and in Rhode Island. The Providence Urban League, along with the newly formed Rhode Island Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, received many complaints regarding the waiting time of African American residents to get into public housing in Providence.

1942 The newly built family and military housing at Tonomy Hill in Newport faced the challenge of racial integration. One hundred white residents of the public housing project signed and delivered a petition to the Newport Mayor expressing concern the project had recently opened rentals to Negroes. The petition stated five points to be considered in their objection.

An Urban League Office was established in Newport in 1956 for the purpose of “Improving the working and living conditions of non-white citizens.” Their focus was the city’s urban renewal efforts within Newport’s West Broadway neighborhood.

1958 The Citizens United for a Fair Housing Law was organized and led by businessman Irving J. Fain. That year, they submitted legislation “that would prohibit racial and other group discrimination in the sale or rental of private houses in the state.”

The magnitude of the opposition to fair housing was immense. In 1959 Providence attorney Robert Dresser led over 500 opponents of the Fair Housing legislation to protest at the Rhode Island State House, “a fair housing law would infringe on private property rights, legislate social progress, lower property values, and increase racial tension in the state.” The points Dresser and the fair housing opponents made were chillingly similar to the 1942 petition to restrict African heritage citizens from living at the Tonomy Hill public housing project in Newport.

1963 the Providence Redevelopment Agency approved Irving Jay Fain’s University Heights mix-use redevelopment plan that converted 32 acres within the Lippitt Hill neighborhood. The project was the first housing development in Rhode Island, within an urban renewal project area, that combined racial and economic integration.

The Rhode Island Fair Housing Practices Act is enacted in 1965 and prohibited owners and lessees from denying the purchase or rental of property on the bases of race, color, religion, or country of ancestral origin.
The 1970’s started positively. The City of Providence, in 1971, was one of the earliest Northeast cities to embrace public school desegregation and the Providence School Committee presented a plan to better integrate the Senior High Schools affected by de facto segregation. This action was in great contrast to the violent response to public school integration in Boston. Possibly, the most welcome and controversial decision on Civil Rights this decade took place when the United States Supreme Court in 1978 under the “Regents of the University of California V. Bakke” upheld a landmark decision on Affirmative Action, which allowed race to be one of several factors in college admission policy. That decision not only upheld the civil rights efforts throughout the 20th century, the decade had the largest enrollment of African Americans into higher education institutions in the nation’s history. African heritage citizens in Rhode Island directly benefited as they enrolled in large numbers in both public and private institutions, which led to significant social and economic advancement.

Lippitt Hill Elementary replaced two smaller Providence East Side elementary schools (one predominantly white, one predominantly black) and was consciously planned by the neighborhoods and the City to bring the two communities together. It opened in the Lippitt Hill redevelopment area in 1967. It was later re-named Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School.

In 1966, Isadore S. Ramos became the first teacher of color at East Providence High School.

In December of 1968, Brown University students walked out of class after the University failed to make progress on demands set by students of color earlier in the year. The University president met with students and they set changes in motion to make the University more inclusive.

Education for the Future
1967 - 1978

In 1966, Isadore S. Ramos became the first teacher of color at East Providence High School.
The Civil Rights Movement in America shifted the hearts, minds, and laws of our nation. In Rhode Island, the evolution of rights for all citizens is firmly rooted in the effort led by African heritage inhabitants who fought for their personal freedom in the 18th century, and for equal access to employment, housing, and education throughout the 20th century. The challenge as we enter the 21st century is to recognize that civil rights in America and Rhode Island is still an unfinished business. Poverty, affordable housing, higher education, and criminal justice and immigration reform are issues that still impact far too many.

“I believe the day is coming is not far off, when in the commonwealth of Rhode Island, the stomping ground of soul liberty will become the home of the free and the land of the truly brave. The home of the free, where fair play in all the walks of life will be accorded.”

Representative Mahlon Van Horne, 1887