

The Fowler House

112 High Street was built in 1824 by Samuel Fowler, a man who escaped slavery in New York and the patriarch of a family that worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery and equal rights.

Samuel Fowler (1778-1863) was born in 1778 into slavery in Troy, New York.¹

In 1799, New York State began to abolish slavery. The gradual abolition law declared that children born after July 4, 1799, to enslaved mothers would be born free but would have to provide free services to their mothers' masters until they reached the age of 25 if female and 28 if male.² In 1799, Samuel was 21 years old and remained enslaved under the new law. Samuel did not stay in New York to witness the final act of emancipation passed in 1817; he escaped from his enslavement to the neighboring state of Massachusetts around 1808 when he was about 30 years old.³

In 1780, when the State of Massachusetts Constitution was established, slavery was legal in the Commonwealth. However, during the years 1781 to 1783, in three related cases known today as "the Quock Walker case," the Supreme Judicial Court applied the principle of judicial review to abolish slavery when two slaves were victorious in a lawsuit against their "owners," charging them with assault and battery and winning their freedom. In doing so, the Court held that laws and customs that sanctioned slavery were incompatible with the new state constitution.⁴

Further research is needed to find more on Samuel's life in New York and how he arrived in Massachusetts. We don't necessarily know if he escaped, bought his freedom, or was released by his "owner."

Samuel married Clarrissa Buckler (1790-1821) in 1814 and they had three children: Samuel L (1814-1869), Adaline (1817-1887,) and William (1818-1851.) Clarrissa died in childbirth in 1821 and Samuel married Bathsheba Hull (1781-1859) shortly after in 1823.

Samuel Fowler purchased a lot of land (now known as 112 High Street) in Charlestown in 1824. As was customary, Samuel built a house where his family would live. In 1833,

¹ Adeline Roberts, death certificate, February 13, 1887. Massachusetts U.S. Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988, copy in possession of author.

² Landy, Craig A. "When did Slavery End in New York?" *Historical Society of the New York Court*, accessed February 14, 2023 <https://history.nycourts.gov/when-did-slavery-end-in-new-york/>

³ "Obituary," s.v. Samuel Fowler, *The Liberator*, Newspapers.com November 27, 1863, copy in possession of author.

⁴ Brooks, Rebecca Beatrice, *Slavery in Massachusetts*. HistoryofMassachusetts.org <https://historyofmassachusetts.org/slavery-in-massachusetts/> accessed February 14, 2023

Fowler purchased a parcel of land across the street at 119 upon which he built a beer barn used to brew spruce beer. On July 4th, 1840, the beer barn was set on fire by arsonists and burned down.⁵ The beer barn was replaced with a house at 119, while Samuel's son William continued the beer making business at 87 Elm Street.

Bathsheba was a member of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society,⁶ a group founded in 1834 that believed that "all people are immortal souls created by God, and that no one should live under the cruel system of slavery."⁷ The group orchestrated national conventions and a multi-state petition campaign, sued people that brought slaves into Boston, and sponsored fundraisers supporting abolitionist activities. Bathsheba led a "committee that raised the first contribution to sustain the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*."⁸

The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society started to break apart by 1839, as male abolitionists claimed the society was not an anti-slavery movement but a disguised women's movement. Reverend Amos Phelps, who originally helped form the society, thought the group diverged into a women's movement once they started to argue for the importance of women in society. Prominent ministers claimed the members of the society "behave[ed] in a manner unbecoming to their sex." Some of these reverends believed that if feminism was promoted, it would be a slippery slope leading to the support of anarchy, infidelity, and atheism. Eventually, the Massachusetts Abolition Society formed in opposition to the Boston Anti-Slavery Female society and stole its spotlight.⁹

Bathsheba and Samuel remained active in their abolition work. In response to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Samuel and Bathsheba, along with other Charlestown and Somerville residents, petitioned the Senate and House of Representatives to protest against "the law passed in the last session of Congress in relation to the Surrender of Fugitive Slaves, and to make every effort to repeal."¹⁰ They also petitioned the Senate and House of Representatives to "provide by legislation, some efficient means to prevent the colored children of Charlestown from being deprived of the equal privileges of the Common Schools."¹¹

⁵ "Fires" Boston Post, Newspapers.com July 4, 1840, copy in possession of author.

⁶ "Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society s.v. Bathsheba Fowler." AmericanAbolitionists.com <http://www.americanabolitionists.com/boston-female-anti-slavery-society.html> Accessed February 14, 2023

⁷ Boston female abolitionists call upon women to join their cause, History Engine, 3.0, University of Virginia, Richmond. Accessed February 14, 2023 <https://historyengine.richmond.edu/episodes/view/6828>

⁸ "Bathsheba Fowler," *The Liberator*, Newspapers.com, 27 July 1849, copy in possession of author.

⁹ Boston female abolitionists call upon women to join their cause, History Engine, 3.0, University of Virginia, Richmond. Accessed February 14, 2023 <https://historyengine.richmond.edu/episodes/view/6828>

¹⁰ Petition, copy in possession of author.

¹¹ Petition, copy in possession of author.

Samuel's daughter Adeline married Benjamin Franklin Roberts (1814-1881), a Black printer, writer and abolitionist. The couple moved to Boston and continued the fight for equality, particularly in Boston Public Schools. In 1847, Roberts applied for their 5 year old daughter to attend school close to their house. The committee denied the request four times on the basis that Sarah could attend the Abiel Smith School¹² (46 Joy Street, Beacon Hill), the closest school for Black children. In protest, Roberts entered Sarah into the school closest to her house in 1848. After the school ejected her, Benjamin Roberts filed suit against the City of Boston. Robert Morris, one of the first Black men to pass the Bar in the State of Massachusetts and his co-counsel Charles Sumner (a future abolitionist Senator) represented Benjamin and Sarah when the Supreme Court of Massachusetts heard the case on November 1, 1849. Sumner argued that school segregation on the basis of race was a violation of equality and that the separation of the schools, so far from being for the benefit of both races, was an injury to both. It tended to create a feeling of degradation in the Blacks, and of prejudice and uncharitableness in the whites.¹³

Despite their best efforts, Judge Lemuel Shaw ruled on the side of the Boston Primary School Committee in 1850. This decision not only posed a significant setback for the equal schools movement in Boston, but also provided precedent for the "separate but equal" argument used later to help solidify Jim Crow segregation in the country. African Americans continued to work for school equality and, in 1855, the Massachusetts legislature outlawed segregation in public schools in a widely celebrated win for the equal schools movement.

Bathsheba died in 1859; her last residence was at 119 High Street. Samuel married a third time in April of 1862 and a year and a half before he died of consumption (known as tuberculosis today) in 1863. His last residence was at 112 High Street. In his will, Samuel left the property on the northeast side of High Street (now numbers 117 and 119) to his son Samuel and the property, including the house, on the corner of High and North (now 112 Salem Street Avenue) to his daughter Adaline. He also left \$130 worth of personal effects and \$1,400 worth of cash to his children, equivalent to about \$32,137 today.

Adaline and her children held No.112 High Street until 1883, when it was purchased by Nathaniel E. Hill. Samuel Jr. held No. 119 High Street until 1866, when it was purchased

¹² Abiel Smith School (Boston African American National Historic Site) National Park Service, Accessed February 14, 2023
https://www.nps.gov/places/abiel-smith-school.htm?utm_source=place&utm_medium=website&utm_campaign=experience_more&utm_content=large

¹³ *Sarah C. Roberts vs. The City of Boston* 59 Mass. 198, 5 Cush. 198 (1849)

by Nathaniel Shattuck. The original house was razed and the extant brick structure was built in 1868.

The Fowler House at 112 High Street has been lovingly maintained since it was built in 1824. It serves as a physical connection to Charlestown's past as well as an opportunity for us to honor the Fowler family and their work for equality.

If you would like to read more about Benjamin, Adaline and Sarah Fowler's struggle for equality, *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America* by Stephen and Paul Kendrick can be found on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). The book will be available in the Charlestown Branch of the Boston Public Library beginning February 20th.

Special thanks to current owners Amy Munichiello and Tony Reidy. The preservation of the house, their love of its history, and many hours of research allows Samuel and Bathsheba's story and their family's pursuit for equality to be shared today.