

MASSACHUSETTS
City of Northampton

In the City Council, February 2, 2023

Upon the Recommendation of Councilor Jamila Gore, Councilor Garrick Perry and Councilor Marissa Elkins.

“And so we must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely.”

- *The Case for Reparations, The Atlantic, June 2014, by Ta-Nehisi Coates*

“For when a nation founded on the belief in racial hierarchy truly rejects that belief then and only then will we have discovered a new world. That is our destiny. To make it manifest, we must challenge ourselves to live our lives in solidarity across color, origin, and class. We must demand changes to the rules in order to disrupt the very notion that those who have more money are worth more in our democracy and our economy. Since this country’s founding, we have not allowed our diversity to be our superpower and the result is that the United States is not more than the sum of its disparate parts. But it could be. And if it were, all of us would prosper. In short, we must emerge from this crisis in our republic with a new birth of freedom. Rooted in the knowledge that we are so much more, when the we in we the people is not some of us, but all of us. We are greater than and greater for the sum of us.”

- *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together, by Heather McGhee.*

Resolution to Create a Commission to Investigate Racialized Harms Perpetrated Against Black Residents and Workers in Northampton, MA

Northampton's History of Slavery and Complicity in the Harmful Effects of Post-Slavery Racial Segregation, Discrimination and Systemic Racism

Whereas, the enslavement of Black and indigenous people existed in Northampton from the time of its foundation in 1654 until 1783, when the slave trade was abolished in Massachusetts.

Whereas, some of Northampton's most historically significant early leaders, such as Congregational minister Jonathan Edwards (b. 1703-1758), were enslavers.¹

Whereas, though in the first half of the nineteenth century, Northampton's small population of Black residents burgeoned, in the years leading up to the Civil War, the Black community in Northampton found their freedom and safety again at stake and were also confronted by instances of racialized violence from white residents in the area,² leading most of Northampton's Black residents to flee the area.³

Whereas, while the Black communities in many towns and cities in the west, midwest and the east coast grew during the twentieth century as southern Blacks migrated north to escape the racial terrorism and discrimination rampant in the Jim Crow South, Northampton remained an overwhelmingly white town.⁴

¹ During his life, Jonathan Edwards maintained one of the city's largest enslaved populations. The historical marker in Downtown Northampton commemorating his historical significance omits any discussion of his status as a person who profited from owning other human beings.

² Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Time, with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from her "Book of Life" (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 48 "Another Camp Meeting".

³ Legislation such as the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and the ruling in the 1857 Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, meant that formerly enslaved people were not safe even in states where slavery had been abolished. In the 1850 census, there were sixty African Americans in Florence, 10% of the Florence population. Ten years later, the 1860 census found there were only twenty-two Black people remaining in Florence, eleven of whom were members of one family.

⁴ Isabel Wilkerson details the extraordinary period of Black migration between 1950 and 1970 in her 2011 book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*.

Whereas, Northampton’s lack of diversity was entrenched by racist property covenants and segregationist zoning which had the effect of discouraging Black people from living in the city and excluding Black people who did choose to live here from most neighborhoods in the city.⁵

Whereas, the practices of private industry and financial institutions, coupled with discriminatory governmental practices in areas such as permitting and licensing, in Northampton and throughout the country, prevented Black people from qualifying for loans to start businesses and buy homes in Northampton and diminished employment opportunities in Northampton for Black people.

The Legacy: A City Lacking in Diversity and a Diminution of Black Community and Culture

Whereas, as of the date of this resolution, Northampton Public Schools has only nine Black professional staff members out of a total of 424 and four Black support staff members out of a total of 273, and the city only hired its first Black Superintendent in 2022.⁶

Whereas, there has never been a Black mayor in Northampton and only three Black people have ever been elected to City Council.

Whereas, there has never been a Black person appointed as chief or head of most municipal departments, including the police department, fire department, department of public works, and planning department.⁷

Whereas, according to the most recent census data, only 6.5% of Northampton’s population is Black or multi-racial of Black descent, making Northampton far less diverse than the national average and many surrounding communities.⁸

⁵ For example, in 1927, a new housing development was constructed on Ridgewood Terrace that contained the following provision in its property deeds: “said premises shall not be sold to or occupied by any colored people.”

⁶ Dr. Janell Pearson-Campbell, a Black woman, was hired as Interim Superintendent of Northampton Public Schools in 2022.

⁷ Anthony Patillo, a Black man, served as Building Commissioner from 1996 until 2010.

⁸ Table P1: Race in the Census bureau’s DEC Redistricting Data (PL 94-171) lists this population of “Black or African American” at 915. Table S0601 puts the percentage of this population at 2.1%.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?g=1600000US2546330&tid=DECENNIALPL2020.P1>.

Among the “Black or African American” racial group that includes bi-racial individuals with one or more additional races other than Black or African American, the total population is 993 or

Whereas, disproportionately more Black Northampton residents are poor relative to their white neighbors.⁹

Whereas, persistent gaps in educational attainment continue to exist between Black Northampton residents and their white neighbors.¹⁰

Northampton’s History of Protest, Activism and Reform

Whereas, even as Northampton’s history involves slavery, racial discrimination, and systemic racism, the city also has a deep history of community centered around abolition activism that included free Black people, formerly enslaved people and white allies who contributed greatly to the cultural and historic fabric of Northampton, particularly the village of Florence.¹¹

Whereas, throughout the struggle to end racial injustices in this country, Northampton residents have historically risen up in protest and activism.¹²

3.5%. DP05 ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?g=1600000US2546330&tid=ACSDP5Y2020.DP05>.

⁹ 21.9% of Northampton’s Black population, compared to 10.1% of its white population, has annual earnings below the poverty line. This poverty total applies to the “Black or African American-alone” racial group and does not include mixed-race peoples. Table S1701. Poverty Status in the past 12 months. Census Bureau’s 2021 American Community Survey.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?g=1600000US2546330&tid=ACSST5Y2020.S1701>

¹⁰ Only 21.6% of Black Northampton residents have Bachelor’s degrees or above, compared to 62.9% of white community members. 2020 American Community Survey. Table. S1501. Educational Attainment.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?g=1600000US2546330&tid=ACSST5Y2020.S1501>.

¹¹ The Northampton Association of Education and Industry (NAEI), an abolitionist community founded in 1842 and lasting until 1846, sought to enact racial and gender equality in their community life. NAEI counted among its members African Americans David Ruggles, Sojourner Truth, and Basil Dorsey. After the dissolution of the NAEI, all three bought property in Florence with the assistance of white former NAEI members.

¹² After the federal government passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Black and white Northampton citizens gathered at the Northampton Town Hall on October 23, 1850 in support of and in solidarity with their formerly enslaved neighbors to express outrage. They passed resolutions to uphold the Declaration of Independence, to protect all persons of all conditions, and to repeal and prevent enforcement of the law. One hundred and seventy years later, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, thousands of people peacefully marched through the streets

Whereas, in the twenty-first century, the city has committed itself to reforming exclusionary zoning laws, developing affordable housing, and diversification of the housing market with the goal of reversing entrenched segregation and lack of diversity and making Northampton a welcoming place for all people to live, work and learn.

Whereas, the city has taken steps to answer the community’s call for racial justice reform by creating the Policing Review Commission¹³ and acting expeditiously to enact the mandates set out in its 2021 report, *Reimagining Safety*, including establishment of the Department of Community Care.

Whereas, in 2020, the Northampton City Council passed R.20-107 A Resolution in Support of and Committing to Actions at the Federal, State and Local Level to Combat the Public Health Crisis of Systemic Racism acknowledging the council’s “obligation to advance racial equity by undoing the inequities found in the law, and to proactively pass ordinances and make budget decisions that address inequity,”¹⁴ and the city charter-mandated 2020 Special Committee for Review of Ordinances, chaired by Councilor John T. Thorpe, Northampton’s first Black City Councilor, accepted this resolution “as the guiding principle of its focus” in its work, leading it to focus particularly on issues of zoning, rental housing, parking, nuisance laws, and land ownership.¹⁵

Whereas, in 2022, the Northampton City Council, recognizing that “that many residents of Northampton experience structural barriers to participation in civic life, such as lack of financial resources, adequate transportation, adequate technology and internet, and lack of childcare,” formed the Select Committee to Study Barriers to City Service.¹⁶

Whereas, even with this history of community activism and municipal efforts, overt racism, racial discrimination, and systemic racism continue to exist in Northampton and its institutions,

of Northampton to protest the epidemic of Black men being killed by police and to demand criminal legal system reform.

¹³ <https://www.northamptonma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/16810/Reimagining-Safety---Northampton-Policing-Review-Commission-Report>

¹⁴ R.20-107 was sponsored by Councilors Gina Louise Sciarra, William Dwight and John T. Thorpe.
<https://northamptonma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/15915/20107-A-Resolution-in-Support-of-Actions-to-Combat-the-Public-Health-Crisis-of-Systemic-Racism?bidId=>.

¹⁵ <https://northamptonma.gov/2350/Ordinance-Review-Committee>

¹⁶ <https://northamptonma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/19365/22027-A-Resolution-to-Form-a-Select-Committee-to-Study-Barriers-to-Service-on-City-Boards-and-Commissions---Certified>

causing ongoing harm to Black people and limiting the city from achieving its goals for all of its residents.

Whereas, this history of slavery and racism in this country, and in Northampton, fundamentally harmed the physical, emotional, social, and economic well-being of enslaved people and continues to harm their descendants.

Be it resolved that the Northampton City Council, by and through this resolution, acknowledges that by its past actions and legislation, it entrenched segregation, discrimination and systemically racist outcomes in areas such as zoning, housing, licensing, and business development. By enacting and perpetuating these laws and policies, the Council harmed Black people who lived and worked in the city of Northampton and impoverished the city by preventing the establishment and growth of Black community and culture.

Be it resolved, the Northampton City Council apologizes for its role in these past harms and commits itself to continuing to reform city ordinances and policies within its purview that perpetuate historic and present racial injustices, and to consider all future legislation and policies through a lens of racial equity.

Be it further resolved that a joint Mayoral-City Council Commission, consisting of at least 50% of Black community members, be established to study racialized harms perpetrated against Black residents, workers, and students in Northampton, historically and currently, and, (a) consider what initiatives should be funded and implemented by the city to support redress and fair treatment for Black people who live, work, and learn in this community, and, (b) examine ways to restore, grow, and nourish Black community and culture in Northampton for future generations.

Be it further resolved that the mayor and sponsoring councilors shall present to the full council, no later than March 30, 2023, a plan specifying the charge and composition of the commission, as well as an approximate timeline for its work.

Be it further resolved that, upon completion of its charge, the Commission should issue an oral and published report of its findings to the Mayor and City Council.


In City Council, February 16, 2023
Adopted in Final Reading on Roll Call Vote of 9 Yes, 0 No, 0 Absent

Attest: , Clerk of Council

Passed final reading and enrolled.
I hereby certify that the above Resolution was adopted by the Northampton City Council on February 16, 2023

Approved: Gina-Louise Sciarra, Mayor

Gina-Louise Sciarra, Mayor approved the Resolution on February 22, 2023

Attest: , Clerk of Council