

**HANDOUT**

# Boston Community Profiles

## Black People in Boston

People of African descent have lived in Boston for nearly as long as the city has existed. The first enslaved Africans were brought to Boston in 1638, eight years after the English founded the city on land taken from the Massachusetts, Pawtucket, Wampanoag, and Nipmuc peoples. Massachusetts was the first British colony to legalize the slave trade, in 1641, and also the first state to outlaw slavery, in 1781. After that, the city fostered a small free Black community. Free Black residents of Boston then began campaigning to end slavery nationwide, helping to make Boston a center of the abolitionist movement during the period leading up to the Civil War. The Black population grew slowly but steadily in the later half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century.

After World War II, the number of Black residents of Boston began to grow much more rapidly. In 1940, the US census counted about 24,000 Black people in Boston. By 1960, that number exceeded 63,000, and by 1970 it exceeded 100,000. This increase is partly the result of the Great Migration, during which more than 6 million African Americans fled the racial terror of the South for cities in the North and West. Immigration from the Caribbean and Africa also contributed to Boston's growing Black population. Between 1940 and 1970, the percentage of the Boston population that was Black rose from less than 5% to more than 15%. This was due both to the increasing number of African American newcomers to the city and to the increasing number of white Bostonians who left the city to take advantage of new suburban economic development and housing, from which Blacks were restricted. In the 1960s and 1970s, Black Bostonians predominantly lived in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, the South End, Dorchester, and Jamaica Plain.

**Sources:**

- [Great Migration to Global Immigration: A Profile of Black Boston](#). Report published by the Boston Foundation, 2023.
- "Boston Population by Race, 1790-2010," and other [population data compiled by the Boston Public Library](#).

## Latinx People in Boston

Significant numbers of Latinx people began to arrive in Boston for the first time in the 1950s. By 1970, Boston had between 30,000 and 40,000 Latinx residents. The Latinx population was concentrated in the South End, Mission Hill, Jamaica Plain, and Roxbury neighborhoods. About 40% were Puerto Rican, the first of whom arrived in small numbers in the Boston area in the late nineteenth century. After World War II, Puerto Rico's economy shifted rapidly from agriculture to industry, but it could not provide enough jobs. As a result, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans moved to the continental United States. In 1954, Massachusetts and Puerto Rico created a program to bring agricultural workers to the state to help harvest crops. Many of those people eventually settled in Boston.

Puerto Ricans have been US citizens since 1917, so they were able to move to Boston and elsewhere in the continental United States freely. Latinx people from Latin America and other parts of the Caribbean did not begin to arrive in Boston until after 1965, when strict limits on immigration to the United States were lifted. The Latinx community in Boston then began to grow more quickly and to become more diverse, with newcomers arriving from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Central America. Immigration to Boston from Brazil also increased in the 1960s and 1970s, foreshadowing the arrival of a much larger number of Brazilian newcomers to the city beginning in the 1980s.

### Sources:

- Cruz, Tatiana M. F. "We Took 'Em On': The Latino Movement for Educational Justice in Boston, 1965–1980." *Journal of Urban History* 43, issue 2 (2017): 235–55.
- "[Dominicans](#)," "[Central Americans](#)," and "[Brazilians](#)" entries from [Global Boston: A Portal to the Region's Immigrant Past and Present](#).

## Chinese American People in Boston

Chinese immigrants arrived in North Adams, Massachusetts, in the 1870s, and some made their homes in Boston shortly thereafter. By the 1880s, Boston's Chinatown neighborhood had been established. By 1900, there were more than 1,000 Chinese American Bostonians. Most Chinese immigrants were men seeking work. In 1875, the United States enacted the Page Act, which prohibited the immigration of most Chinese women, largely due to the racist and sexist stereotype that Chinese women would engage in prostitution. In 1882, the United States enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning nearly all immigration from China. As a result of these immigration restrictions, by the 1960s, Chinese American communities in Boston and elsewhere in the United States tended to be older and predominantly male. After the Immigration Act of 1965 was enacted, immigration from China and other parts of Asia increased rapidly, bringing younger Chinese immigrants—men, women, and families—to Boston. The population of Chinese American Bostonians grew by 50% in the 1960s, reaching about 7,000 by 1970.

In 1970, Boston's Chinese American population was concentrated in Chinatown, but the neighborhood was shrinking. In the 1960s, large parts of Chinatown were razed to make room for the construction of the Massachusetts Turnpike and Tufts-New England Medical Center as part of efforts to transform the city through "urban renewal" programs. Many Chinese American Bostonians were displaced by these programs and began to move to other neighborhoods, such as the South End, Mission Hill, and Allston-Brighton. Others moved to the suburbs.

### Sources:

- [Chinatown Atlas](http://Chinatownatlas.org) (Chinatownatlas.org).
- "Chinese" entry from [Global Boston: A Portal to the Region's Immigrant Past and Present](#).
- Liu, Michael. *Forever Struggle: Activism, Identity, and Survival in Boston's Chinatown, 1880–2018*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020.

## White People in Boston

As the populations of African American, Latinx, and Chinese American Bostonians grew after World War II, the population of white Bostonians shrank significantly. Many of the elite, wealthy white Bostonians who traced their family trees back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony moved away from the city by the early twentieth century, as waves of immigrants from Ireland and Italy arrived. By the 1950s, according to historian Jim Vrabel, middle-class whites joined the wealthy people who were leaving the city, “drawn to the suburbs made suddenly affordable by federally backed mortgages and accessible by federally funded highways. Most of those remaining in Boston were poor and working class.” (The affordable mortgages that made it possible for middle-class whites to purchase homes in the suburbs were still too expensive for poor and working-class white families, and these mortgages were denied to people of color by the federal government.)

While those who remained in Boston included growing numbers of African Americans, Latinx Americans, and Chinese Americans, the majority were from European immigrant communities. Still, the number of white Bostonians continued to shrink, from 760,000 in 1950 to less than 525,000 in 1970. The state’s investment in the technology industry in Boston’s suburbs benefited those moving to those regions and drained jobs and resources from the city. Efforts to transform the city through redevelopment projects known as “urban renewal” decimated parts of poor and working-class neighborhoods. For instance, in the 1950s, the entire West End neighborhood was destroyed in order to build high-rise residential buildings, and the new residences were too expensive for the displaced residents, largely working-class Italian Americans, to afford. By 1970, South Boston had a higher percentage of families with low incomes than any neighborhood in the city.<sup>1</sup>

### Sources:

- Vrabel, Jim. *A People’s History of the New Boston*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014, 5–9.
- Hampton, Henry, and Steve Fayer. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. Bantam, 1990. Kindle edition, 594.
- “Boston Population by Race, 1790–2010” and other [population data compiled by the Boston Public Library](#).

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau, [1970 Census of Population, Supplementary Report – Low Income Neighborhoods in Large Cities: 1970, Boston, Mass., May 1974](#), accessed November 21, 2023.