

Capital Community College 950 Main Street Hartford, CT

Hartford's Talcott Street Church & Black Community Formation



The foundation of authority is laid firstly in the free consent of people.
Rev. Thomas Hooker

Hartford founder Reverend Thomas Hooker's 1638 sermon outlined ideas that would appear in the fundamental orders—the colony's rationale for independent government. His "election sermon" illustrated the relationship between church leaders and colonial governance. Religious leaders were also political leaders in 18th and 19th-century Connecticut and that reality defined life for the growing population of enslaved Blacks, the remaining Indigenous populations, and lower status colonists.

New England's wealth and populations increased during the 1700s as shipping between American and West Indian colonies evolved. That commerce included moving captive Africans and Indigenous populations between those colonies as enslaved labor. Connecticut's Black and Indigenous subjects soon understood the boundaries of colonial authority, and they petitioned, sued, and formally complained about their enslavers and their status. Those 18th-century cases were reviewed, recorded, and often dismissed. Black and Indigenous complainants had the privilege of challenging their captors, but they didn't have the authority to win. They shared cultural, religious, and political resources with their enslavers. For centuries they suffered with religious hierarchies alongside the lower status colonial residents who struggled against injustice and longed for the freedom often mentioned in sermons and political rhetoric of the period. As the colonies prepared for war with Britain, American colonial rhetoric suggested their situation equaled slavery under Britain. The irony of those comparisons was not lost on enslaved Blacks who would have happily switched continents to be free. Some American patriots did free their enslaved before joining the Revolution, but other enslavers required Black soldiers to purchase their freedom after their military service.

Connecticut legislators approved a gradual end to slavery in the early 1800s. It provided some freedom but little authority as Black, taxpaying, landowning residents realized when they tried, unsuccessfully, to vote. The 1818 Connecticut constitution specified that *whiteness* would be a qualification to vote in Connecticut. The new constitution also limited the authority of the Congregational church—the Standing Order— which had been the tax supported, political authority.

The next year several Black worshipers at Hartford's First Congregational Church met with the pastor about their worship situation. A plan for independent worship soon followed with a Sunday school, and—with a five year schedule— a new building.

Those parishioners were part of a movement; a decade after the ratification of the 1818 Constitution, Black communities around Connecticut had established Hartford's Talcott Street Church, New Haven's Varick AME Zion and Temple Street churches, and Middletown's Cross Street AME Zion Church. In these foundational churches members found freedom, shared consent, and nurtured their religious and political authority to build vibrant Black communities in 19th-century Connecticut.

We are Iconic!

The Reverend **Lemuel Haynes** was born in *West Hartford, CT* and indentured to a farmer in *Granville, MA*. After the Revolutionary War, he resumed religious studies to become one of the first Black men ordained in the Congregational church.

In a book published in 1850 one of **Gad Asher's** grandsons, Rev. Jeremiah Asher, wrote about his grandfather's abduction from the coast of *Guinea*.

Activist, educator, political leader, and daguerreotype photographer **Augustus Washington** was born in *Trenton, NJ*.

Educator, correspondent, and Gad Asher descendant **Rebecca Primus** was born in *Hartford, CT*. She taught in *Maryland* during the Civil War.

The poet **Ann Plato's** family was devoted to the Talcott Street Church where she learned to love literature and later led the school.

James Mars, the abolitionist, Talcott Street Church leader, and *Canaan, CT* native, escaped slavery as a child but later traded his parents' freedom for his return to slavery.

Mars's sister **Elizabeth Mars Johnson Thomson** came to *Hartford, CT* to prepare for missionary service in Liberia with her husband William Thomson.

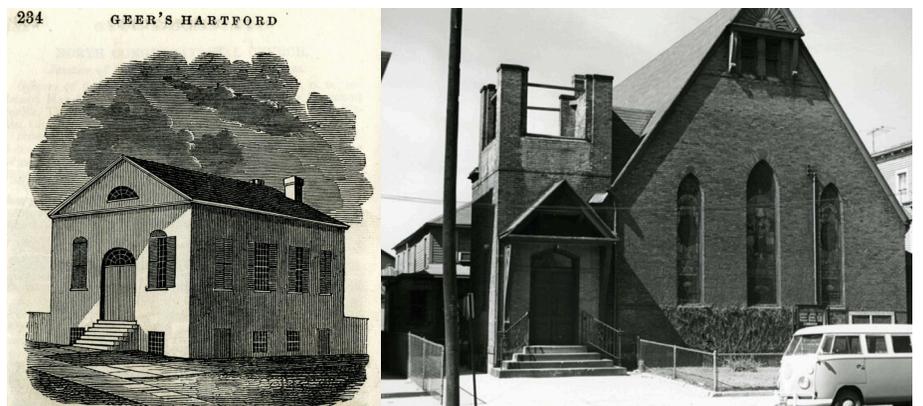
Abolitionist, activist, and orator **Maria W. Stewart** was born free in *Hartford, CT*. Her parents' death led to her indentured service in a religious home with a library which prepared her for writing and public speaking.

Minister and activist **Hosea Easton** pastored *Hartford's* Talcott Street Church and wrote several influential sermons and essays. He anchored the church and school for **Amos Beman, Ann Plato, Augustus Washington,** and **James WC Pennington**, the fugitive blacksmith.

Who Is Monumental?

Connecticut, an original colony, sent residents to participate in the nation's military maneuvers. Many of Connecticut's monuments celebrate the veterans of those wars. As a founding colony, a beneficiary of land dispossession, and of slavery, Connecticut's history with African and Indigenous people is long, complicated, and not acknowledged in the state's public monuments. Captive Africans were present in some of the earliest Connecticut settlements which would have been negotiated with the Indigenous communities already living here. Though their lives are recorded in ancient cemeteries around the state and their labor built historic sites, few of their names and stories are documented in our public monuments. With a few notable exceptions, Black and Indigenous historical figures have not been celebrated as monumental, yet.

What should be Monumental?



Talcott Street Church & Washington logo courtesy of CT Historical Society
Dixwell Congregational Church courtesy of New Haven Museum

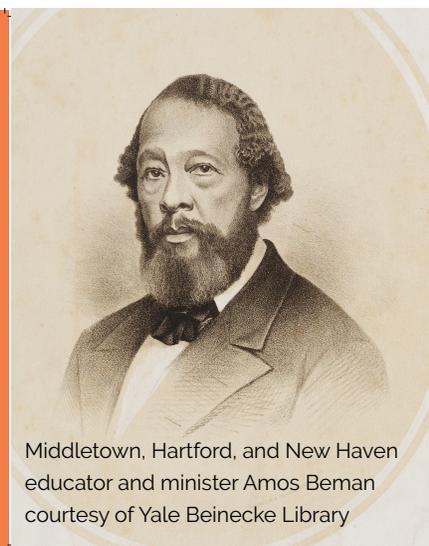


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SAY IT LOUD

“ During the last year or two, we have heard of nothing but revolutions, and the enlargements of the eras of freedom, on both sides of the Atlantic. Our white brethren everywhere are reaching out their hands to grasp more freedom. In the place of absolute monarchies they have limited monarchies, and in the place of limited monarchies they have republics; so tenacious are they of their own liberties.”

James WC Pennington,
The Fugitive Blacksmith, 1849



Middletown, Hartford, and New Haven
educator and minister Amos Beman
courtesy of Yale Beinecke Library