

## ABIEL SMITH SCHOOL

46 JOY STREET, BEACON HILL

The small but growing population of free African-Americans in Boston began to settle on the north slope of Beacon Hill. Although slavery had been abolished by the state Supreme Court in 1783, much of Boston life remained segregated. Blacks were effectively not allowed to attend the public schools, and were forced to sit in the galleries in white churches. So the community founded its own private school (1798) and church (1806) in the neighborhood. The school moved into the basement of the African Meeting House in 1808.

However, Blacks continued to demand public education. But rather than integrate, the city in March 1834 established the Smith School, a school for Black children with initially a white staff. The school in the Meeting House closed. Within five years, overcrowding led Blacks to demand that the Boston School Committee build an addition. The request was denied.

So by 1844, many Blacks began boycotting the school to protest the absence of integrated schools. The boycotters revived the private school in the African Meeting House. In 1848, parents made another attempt at integrating the public schools. When Sarah Roberts was denied entry to all five white neighborhood schools located between her house and the Smith School, her father, Benjamin Roberts sued the city. Local abolitionists soon joined the case. The case eventually reached the Massachusetts Supreme Court, which ruled on April 8, 1850 that the Smith School's education equaled that in the white schools so that desegregation was not needed.

The integrationists then shifted their strategy to the state legislature. In 1851, a bill to end segregation in public schools failed, but in April 1855, a school integration bill finally passed. This was Boston's first successful desegregation case. Over the next century, the city underwent many significant changes that caused the issue to be replayed in the 1960's and 1970's.

The Smith school and the African Meeting House next door now comprise the Museum of Afro-American History in Boston.

**HOURS: 10 A.M.–4 P.M. MONDAY THROUGH SATURDAY.**

**FREE ADMISSION.**

**WWW.AFROAMMUSEUM.ORG**

**617-725-0022**



Abiel Smith School and African Meeting House on Smith Court.