The Vermont Department of Tourism & Marketing extends special thanks to the participating museums and organizations and to Curtiss Reed, Jr. and the Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity for assistance in developing the trail. Thanks also to the project advisory committee: Denise Bailey, Laura Clemmons, Nicole Curvin, Elise A. Guyette, Sadie Holliday, Bradley Mariner, Shambulia G. Sams and Jane Williamson.

Explore museums, cultural sites, exhibits, films and tours that illuminate African American history in Vermont.

For more information,
www.vermontvacation.com/AfricanAmericanHeritageTrail
Vermont’s history is defined by its people. Among the early settlers were African Americans who tilled the land, built homes and fought in the Revolutionary War. African Americans helped to establish communities in the new state of Vermont, and they worked and fought to support the Union cause in the Civil War. They studied in Vermont schools, and went on to become leaders in government, religion, and education.

This guide explores their lives and stories, and of fellow Vermonters whose life’s work focused on issues of equality and freedom.

The trail brings you to Vermont museums and cultural sites where exhibits, films, tours and personal explorations illuminate the lives of African Americans for whom the Green Mountain State was part of their identity. Other historic places along the route chronicle eras, people and events significant to the journey of all African Americans.

You’ll meet teachers, storytellers, activists, ministers and legislators who made their homes in Vermont and made Vermont and the nation a better home for all. Welcome.
Rokeby Museum

Described as “unrivaled” by the National Park Service, Rokeby Museum is a National Historic Landmark and preeminent Underground Railroad site. “Free and Safe: The Underground Railroad in Vermont,” introduces visitors to Simon and Jesse – two historically documented fugitives from slavery who were sheltered at Rokeby in the 1830’s. The exhibit traces their stories from slavery to freedom, introduces the abolitionist Robinson family who called Rokeby home for nearly 200 years, and explores the turbulent decades leading up to the Civil War.

Once a thriving Merino sheep farm, Rokeby retains eight historic farm buildings filled with agricultural artifacts along with old wells, stone walls and fields. Acres of pastoral landscape invite a leisurely stroll or a hike up the trail. Picnic tables are available for dining outdoors.

Rowland Thomas and Rachel Gilpin Robinson

Robinson family home

One of many farm buildings
Vermont Folklife Center

Daisy Turner, born in June 1883 to ex-slaves Alexander and Sally Turner in Grafton, Vermont, embodied living history during her 104 years as a Vermonter. Her riveting style of storytelling, reminiscent of West African griots, wove the history of her family from slavery until her death in 1988 as Vermont’s oldest citizen.

The Vermont Folklife Center recorded over 60 hours of interviews with Daisy. A selection of these audio recordings, plus photographs and video relating to Daisy and the Turner family, are part of an interactive listening exhibit for visitors to the center. The full collection of Turner materials in the Folklife Center Archive is available to qualified researchers by appointment only.


Great Convention Historic Marker

Frederick Douglass delivered a fiery abolitionist speech in Ferrisburgh in July 1843. Born into slavery in Maryland, Douglass freed himself by escaping to the north, where he became a tireless crusader for African American freedom and equality. He was among the greatest orators and black leaders of the 19th century. The Ferrisburgh meeting, organized by local activist Rowland T. Robinson, was one of the “100 Conventions” sponsored by the American Anti-Slavery Society.
By 1834 the small town of Brandon was a hotbed of anti-slavery activity, having already produced two founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society. This heritage is visible today, preserved in the homes, churches and meeting-places of the 19th century village, and at the Brandon Museum at the Stephen Douglas Birthplace.

Exhibits and video tell the stories of how the town’s anti-slavery movement developed and became connected to the national abolitionist movement. Visitors learn how native son Stephen Douglas, Lincoln’s opponent in 1860 - and a slave owner - rose to national prominence, and how his hometown resoundingly rejected his politics due to the issue of slavery.

More history unfolds on Brandon’s self-guided walking tour. Visitors see Brandon’s Baptist church, where the Vermont Anti-Slavery Society held its 1837 convention and where a runaway slave spoke in 1844, and the home of abolitionist organizer and Editor Orson Murray.
Jeffrey Brace
(1742-1827)
Historic Marker

Jeffrey Brace was born in West Africa with the name Boyrereau Brinch. At 16 years of age, he was captured by European slave traders, shipped to Barbados, sold to a ship’s captain, and eventually arrived in New England. Some years later, while still enslaved, Brace enlisted in the Continental Army and he won his freedom fighting in the Revolution. At the war’s end, he settled in Poultney in the newly formed Vermont - the first state to prohibit slavery. He met an ex-slave, married, and raised their family in Poultney. In 1810, he published “The Blind African Slave, Or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch,” one of the most unique and important anti-slavery memoirs written in America.

Martin Henry Freeman (1826-1889)
Historic Marker

Martin Freeman, born in Rutland, was a member of the second East Parish Congregational Church which stood at the site of this marker. He graduated from Middlebury College in 1849 as salutatorian and later served as the first black college president in the U.S. Convinced that little promise existed for the future of African Americans in the U.S., Freeman became active in the emigration movement of both enslaved and free black Americans to Africa and moved his family to Africa in 1864. He was a professor at Liberia College for many years and became its president shortly before his death in 1889.
With a timeline overview that spans 100 years from the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 to the Civil Rights Movement and March on Washington in 1963, the exhibit “Many Voices,” at Sunbeam highlights the voices of the Pullman Company, the Gilded Age passengers who traveled in its comfort, and the porters who provided the impeccable service that made travel by Pullman second to none.

Guided by its mission, “Values into Action,” Hildene uses Sunbeam to present a history that is illuminating and challenging in its content, raising questions intended to stimulate and encourage civil discourse.

Robert Lincoln, son of the Great Emancipator Abraham Lincoln, built his ancestral home in Manchester, Vermont in 1905. The 412 acre Hildene estate was residence to three generations of the President’s descendants. The thought-provoking exhibit at the 1903 Pullman palace car, Sunbeam, paradoxically links the presidential son with his famous father. The fully restored executive railroad car came off the line during Robert Lincoln’s tenure as Pullman Company president.

The Pullman Company at the turn of the century was the largest employer of African Americans in the country, offering former slaves jobs as Pullman porters. In spite of the exploitive work environment, these men were able to improve their lives and those of their families, helping to give rise to America’s black middle class.
Many of Vermont’s early African American citizens left behind little documentation of their lives. But in the case of former slaves Alec and Sally Turner of Grafton, much is known.

Alec, a descendant of an African Chief and an English merchant’s daughter, was born into slavery in Port Royal, Virginia. He escaped to join the 1st New Jersey Cavalry as an assistant cook, and while in service allegedly killed his former overseer. After the war ended, Turner and his family lived in Maine and Boston before settling in Grafton in 1872. Alec worked as a logger and in a saw mill, and raised money to purchase three lots that eventually totaled 150 acres of land. There he built Journey’s End Farm, where he and his wife would raise 13 children.

Today, visitors can learn about Turner family history at the Grafton History Museum, walk the streets of the village, visit the church where the Turner family worshipped, and at the 595 acre Turner Hill Wildlife Management Area, visit the location where the family once lived. The original Turner homestead is no longer standing, but the foundation remains in close proximity to the Turner’s Birchdale Camp. While the State of Vermont works in collaboration with the Preservation Trust of Vermont and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to find a suitable permanent steward of the building and to raise funds for restoration and interpretation, the camp is not open for viewing.
With these words, “Therefore, no male person, born in this country, or brought from over sea, ought to be holden by law, to serve any person, as a servant, slave or apprentice…” the first constitution in America to prohibit slavery was adopted in a tavern in Vermont in 1777. A forward thinking product of its time, freedom was promised for men beyond age 20 and women beyond 17 years.

Written for the newly formed Republic of Vermont, the constitution was also the first to allow men to vote without requiring property ownership, and to authorize a public school system. The document would guide Vermont for 14 years until 1791, when the Republic was admitted to the Union as the 14th state.

Today called the “Birthplace of Vermont,” the restored tavern building looks much as it did more than 200 years ago. An exhibit recounts the writing of the most progressive constitution of its time and examines its effect on the politics of the young nation.

The River Street Cemetery contains the graves of eight veterans of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment.

During the Civil War, 709 African Americans lived in Vermont and of them, 152 served in the Union Army. Those working as support staff could join any unit, but there were only a select few, all-black units in which African Americans could serve as soldiers. The Massachusetts 54th was among the first such units formed, and their success in battle paved the way for other African American units.

African American recruits from towns such as Rutland, Woodstock, Bennington, Burlington, Hinesburgh and Castleton joined the 54th. George Hart, a freed Louisiana slave who was brought north by Vermont troops, was one such recruit. He settled in Woodstock after the war and is among those buried in the River Street Cemetery.

To learn more about Woodstock’s abolitionist history and the town’s African American community, guided and self-guided tours are available through Woodstock’s Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historic Park. “A Walk Through Vermont’s Civil War Home Front,” is also available for download at the Park’s website.
Historically black colleges and universities owe their existence to Senator Justin Smith Morrill. Congress passed his original Land Grant College Act in 1862 and its companion legislation, the Land Grant College Act of 1890. The 1862 Morrill Act donated public lands to selected states and territories for the purpose of establishing agricultural and mechanic arts colleges. However, colleges in former Confederate states denied this opportunity to African Americans.

The subsequent 1890 Morrill Act forced all states to either establish separate colleges for African Americans or to desegregate the colleges established under the first legislation. The southern states chose to establish 16 black colleges and universities. Ultimately the 1890 legislation provided federal funding for the founding of 105 black colleges and universities established before 1964. Students and alumni of these institutions played pivotal roles in the passage of civil rights laws in the U.S.

Justin Morrill was born in Strafford, the son of a blacksmith. At age 15, he had to leave school to work as a merchant’s clerk, and in later years as a legislator, he worked tirelessly to provide others with the opportunities he himself lacked. Morrill’s “Cottage Gothic” style home, outbuildings, and gardens are open to visitors and document his interests in architecture and landscape design. The homestead is Vermont’s first National Historic Landmark.
Thaddeus Stevens (1792-1868)
Historic Marker

Born poor in Danville in 1792, Stevens was schooled by his mother, Sally Morrill Stevens, and at nearby Caledonia County Grammar School, graduating from Dartmouth College in 1814. He became a brilliant lawyer committed to racial equality. As an abolitionist Congressman from his adopted state of Pennsylvania and as chair of the House Ways & Means Committee, he worked to help finance the Civil War. He was recognized as the father of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution and architect of the Reconstruction of the South. He was both renowned and reviled for his eloquent call for the abolition of slavery.

Old Stone House Museum

Located in Vermont’s rural Northeast Kingdom, the Old Stone House Museum is the site of Alexander Twilight’s home, school, church and the stately granite building he built to house students at the Brownington Academy. With buildings dating from 1830 to 1848, the museum is located in the Brownington Village Historic District where Twilight’s dormitory - Athenian Hall - dominates the landscape that looks much the same as it did 150 years ago.

Rev. Alexander Twilight was an educator, minister, politician, and the first African American to earn a bachelor’s degree from an American college or university (see Middlebury College.) Except for a four year absence when the school floundered, Twilight served as the Brownington headmaster from 1829 until his death in 1857. In 1836, Twilight became the first African American elected to public office as a state legislator, and served in the Vermont General Assembly. He was known as an innovative and beloved educator, a preacher, a builder, and a man of great vision.
Rev. George S. Brown
(1801-1886) Historic Marker

Reverend Brown was Vermont’s first African American Methodist minister. He was born in Newport, Rhode Island and became a Methodist minister in Kingsbury, New York in 1833. He made a living by building stone walls, many of which are still standing today. Brown served as a missionary to Liberia from 1837-1843. In 1855, he organized Methodist classes in Wolcott and supervised the building of the church in 1856. As far as can be determined, this is the only church in the U.S. where he served as the head preacher.

George Washington Henderson (c. 1850-1936) Historic Marker

Born in Virginia in 1850, Henderson was a servant to the adjutant in the Eighth Vermont Regiment in the Civil War; he had come to Vermont as an illiterate teen. After receiving an education and graduating at the top of his class from the University of Vermont in 1877, he taught and held positions in Jericho, Craftsbury Common and Newport, Vermont. He went on to earn additional degrees, and lived in Louisiana, Tennessee and Ohio, working as a teacher, author and minister. Today, the University of Vermont provides fellowships in his honor for pre-doctoral and post-doctoral students of diversity.
Early Black Settlers
Historic Marker

From 1795 to 1865 an African American farming community thrived on Lincoln Hill in Hinesburgh. The first settlers at the bottom of the road in 1798, from Massachusetts, were Samuel Peters, Hannah Lensemen and husband Prince Peters. Prince served in Captain Silas Pierce’s MA Line (8th Co, 3rd MA Regiment) for three years during the American Revolution. Samuel Peters II volunteered at the Battle of Plattsburgh during the War of 1812.

This pioneering community cleared the land, joined the local Baptist church, had home manufactories, and exercised their voting rights at Freeman Meetings. Their descendants owned land and contributed to the local economy of the hill until the late 20th century.

The original Clark settlers expanded to five related families just before the Civil War; many are buried in an abandoned cemetery at the top of the hill.

More about the early settlers of Lincoln Hill is described in “Discovering Black Vermont: African American Farmers in Hinesburgh, 1790–1890” by Elise A. Guyette, University of Vermont Press, 2010.

Andrew Harris (1814-1841) Historic Marker

“We consider it criminal in the sight of God and man, longer silently to submit to our indignities, or suffer them to be transmitted to posterity.”

In 1838 Andrew Harris became the first African American graduate of the University of Vermont. Harris went on to be known as an abolitionist and advocate of Black equality. The anti-slavery journal *Liberator* stated he was “probably the most educated colored man in our country,” and was a featured speaker at the 1839 meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Harris was one of the founders of the American & Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, a delegate to the first convention of the Liberty Party, and pastor of the 2nd African Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He died at age 27.
The Changing Face of Vermont: Diversity and Culinary Traditions

Vermont’s population is more diverse than often perceived. Roughly six percent of Vermont’s population is comprised of people of color who represent all regions of America and the world. While some African Americans settled in Vermont generations ago, relatively new to the scene are 1,000-plus Vermonters who recently arrived through the Vermont chapter of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.

This new population of Africans who have made Vermont home bring with them a thriving dynamic of traditions and culture from 17 countries including Somalia, Congo, Sudan and Burundi. These newest Vermonters are enriching the state in innumerable ways. One very tangible influence – traditional cuisine and foods of home - has enhanced the state’s culinary cornucopia. This is celebrated in the confluence of ethnic eateries and markets providing foods that embrace diverse culinary traditions.
Rokeby Museum
4334 U.S. Route 7 Ferrisburgh, VT 05456
(802) 877-3406  www.rokeby.org
Mid-May to Mid-October; admission fee

Great Convention Historic Marker
U.S. Rte. 7, near the Wesleyan Chapel, Ferrisburgh

Vermont Folklife Center
88 Main Street Middlebury, VT 05753
(802) 388-4964  www.vermontfolklifecenter.org
Tuesday - Saturday; donations accepted

Middlebury College - Alexander Twilight Hall
50 Franklin St. Middlebury, VT 05753
(802) 443-5000  www.middlebury.edu

Brandon Museum at the Stephen A. Douglas Birthplace
4 Grove Street (Route 7) Brandon, VT 05733
(802) 247-6401  www.brandon.org
Mid-May to Mid-October; free admission

Jeffrey Brace Historic Marker
Town Green, East Poultney, VT 05741

Martin Henry Freeman Historic Marker
46 North Main Street, Rutland

Hildene The Lincoln Family Home
1005 Hildene Rd. Manchester, VT 05254
(802) 362-1788  www.hildene.org
open daily; admission fee

Grafton History Museum
Main Street Grafton, VT 05146
(802) 843-2584  www.graftonhistory.info
Memorial Day - Columbus Day; admission fee

Turner Hill Wildlife Management Area
Access from Turner Hill Rd. and Townsend/Grafton Rd.
Grafton, VT 05146
www.vtfishandwildlife.com/wma_maps.cfm
open daily

CULINARY TRADITIONS
Community Halal Store
128 North Street, Burlington, VT 05401
(802) 865-1165
East African grocer

Curtis’ BBQ
7 Putney Landing Road, Putney, VT 05346
(802) 387-5474  www.curtisbbqvt.com
Southern style BBQ and sides

Mawuhi African Market
160 N. Winooski Avenue
Burlington, VT 05401
(802) 862-1100
African and Caribbean grocer

Samosaman
At natural foods stores and the Burlington Farmer’s Market
(802) 233-7783  www.somosaman.com
Samosas made with natural and locally sourced ingredients

Winnie’s International Market
Online store & at the Essex Jct. Farmer’s Market
(802) 310-9716  www.wisands.com
Seasonings and Spices sourced in Guyana

FOR FAMILIES & EDUCATORS
Do you want to dig a little deeper into Vermont’s African American history? Incorporate related lesson plans and field trips into your classroom teaching? Take your kids on a African American Heritage GeoTour in search of hidden caches? Educational and family learning resources and activities are recommended by the Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity at www.vtafricanamericanheritage.net.