

MOSES PROPHET TOWNES WORKED FOR DECADES AS A DOORMAN

at Newburyport’s grand Wolfe Tavern, and the *Boston Globe* described him as a “landmark within a landmark” due to his long-term role there. Wolfe Tavern, located here at the corner of State and Harris Streets, featured 60 rooms and a dining room for 100 guests. Business declined during the Great Depression, however, and the owner demolished the stately building in 1954 to replace it with a gas station.

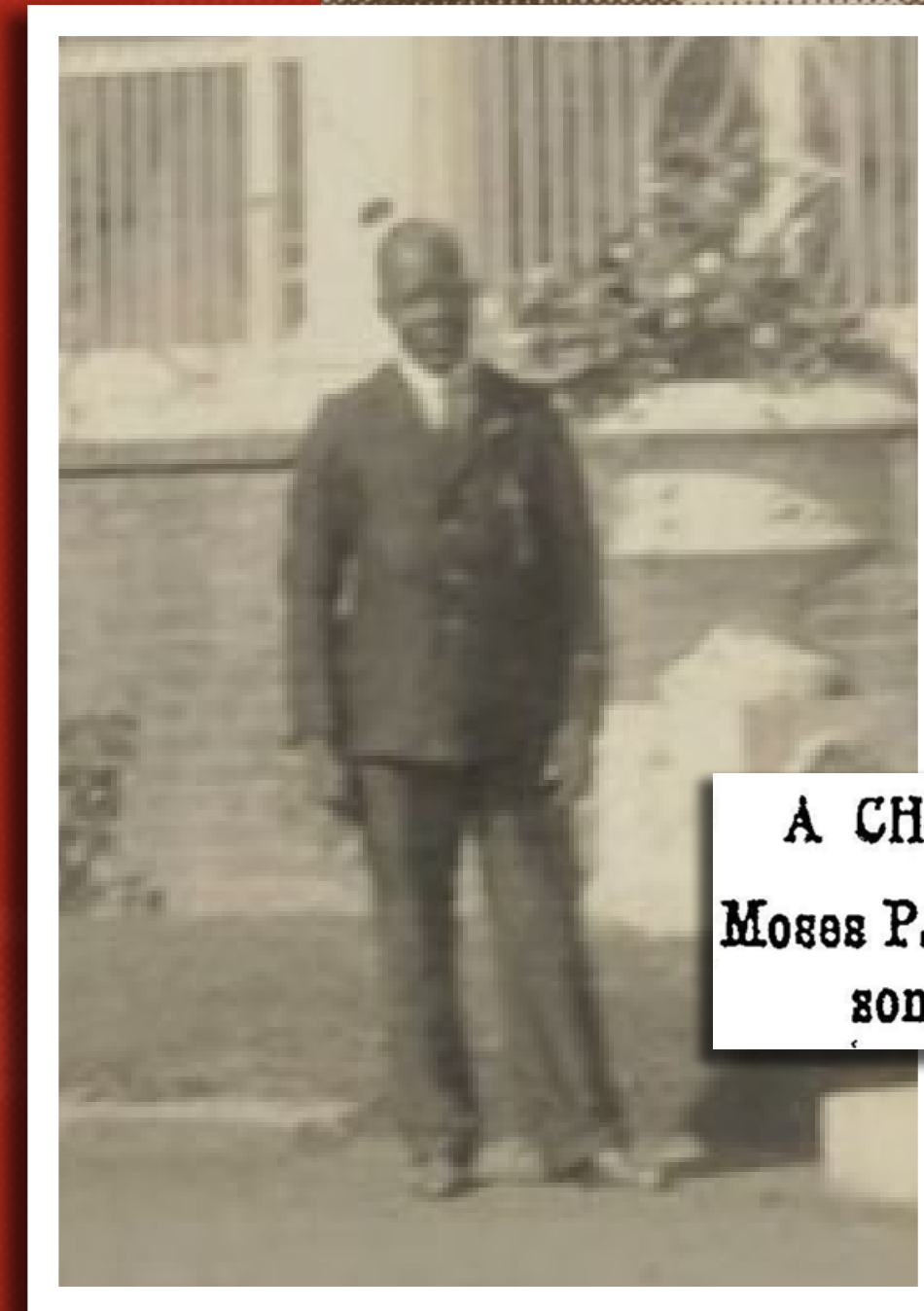
Born in Virginia in 1859, Townes was the eldest of seven surviving children. His parents were formerly enslaved farmers who had not learned to read or write. As a young man, he joined thousands of Black people who migrated north in the late 19th century in the precursor to the Great Migration when more than six million Black people uprooted from the rural South. Townes’ brothers and sister, Lemuel, Walter, and Amanda, later followed him to Newburyport. Like the Townes siblings, more than half of Newburyport’s Black residents in the early 20th century were originally from the South.

By 1886, Townes lived as a boarder at Wolfe Tavern, where he welcomed guests, assisted with carrying bags, and facilitated travel as a porter. In 1899, he married church organist and piano teacher Eliza Ann Dixon and they had a son Thomas, who later enlisted in the US Army during World War I. Their second child, Eleanor Ruth, died as an infant.

Over the years, the *Newburyport Daily News* published many articles about Townes, characterizing him as “suave and popular” and covering such topics as his return from a visit to Virginia, his eye treatments, and his leadership in several local clubs. In 1929, he was the target of a federal sting operation during Prohibition, the nationwide ban on the sale of alcohol. Townes was fined \$100—about two months of his wages—for selling two pints of liquor at the tavern.

Townes worked at the Wolfe Tavern until World War II. The 1940 census indicates that at age 80 he was still working 56 hours per week and 52 weeks a year with an annual salary of \$520. In 1951, the last year Wolfe Tavern was open to the public, Mr. Townes died. Among his pall-bearers were two of his nephews and Kenneth L. Cousins, uncle of former Essex County Sheriff Frank Cousins, Jr. Moses Prophet Townes is buried next to his wife in Newburyport’s Highland Cemetery on Hill Street. Decades after his passing, Townes continued to be remembered fondly by his grandniece Barbara Townes Cutts, who as a little girl enjoyed visiting her “Uncle Mose.” “*He worked hard,*” she said. “*He deserves to be honored with this*

sign.” Text by Geordie Vining, Kabria Baumgartner, and Cyd Raschke (2023)



A CHRISTMAS WEDDING.
Moses P. Townes and Eliza Dick-
son Married Yesterday.

Funeral Conducted
For Moses Townes
Funeral services for Moses Prophet Townes, 3 Tilcomb street, a staff member of the Wolfe Tavern for more than half a century, were conducted Saturday afternoon by the Rev George Lee Fish, pastor of the Green street Baptist church, at the Elliott funeral home, 38 Green street. There was a large attendance of relatives, friends and business associates. Burial was in Highland cemetery. The pallbearers were Ulysses L. Townes, Englewood N J, Daniel E. Townes, New York City, Kenneth L. Cousins, and Melvin Pearson, both of this city.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Moses Prophet Townes
at Wolfe Tavern, about 1929
Courtesy of the Museum of Old Newbury

Envelope addressed to
Moses Prophet Townes,
Wolfe Tavern, May 1918
Peabody Essex Museum, Phillips Library,
Townes Family Papers, MSS 349
Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum

"A Christmas Wedding,"
Newburyport Daily News,
December 26, 1899
Courtesy of *Newburyport Daily News*

"Funeral Conducted for Moses
Townes," *Newburyport Daily
News*, August 27, 1951
Courtesy of *Newburyport Daily News*

BACKGROUND IMAGE:

Wolfe Tavern postcard, 1925
Courtesy of the Museum of Old Newbury

A Landmark within a Landmark

Moses Prophet Townes (1859–1951) migrated from Virginia to Newburyport and worked for more than 50 years on this site at the historic Wolfe Tavern.