

WHILE SLAVERY DECLINED IN LATE 18TH-CENTURY MASSACHUSETTS,

Black Americans continued to face significant social, legal, and educational discrimination. Public schools in Newburyport and other cities and towns excluded Black children or segregated them in rundown schoolhouses with few teachers and resources. There was a privately operated “African School” located “near the pond.”

In 1820, a few courageous girls from Newburyport’s Black neighborhood, then referred to as Guinea, sought to enroll at one of the public girls’ grammar schools. *The Newburyport Daily News* reported white Newburyporters expressing “much annoyance” about this matter. In response, the School Committee voted to exclude Black children from the public schools. Private organizations stepped in again to provide Black children with some learning, and activists later compelled the Committee to open a separate public school for Black children. Educational opportunities and funding, however, remained decisively unequal.

Black Newburyporters continued pushing for equal school rights, and, by 1843, the city’s public schools opened their doors to all children, regardless of race. In 1855, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to pass equal school rights legislation. Public school committees could no longer use race to classify students, and some Black families relocated to neighborhoods where their children would receive the best possible education.

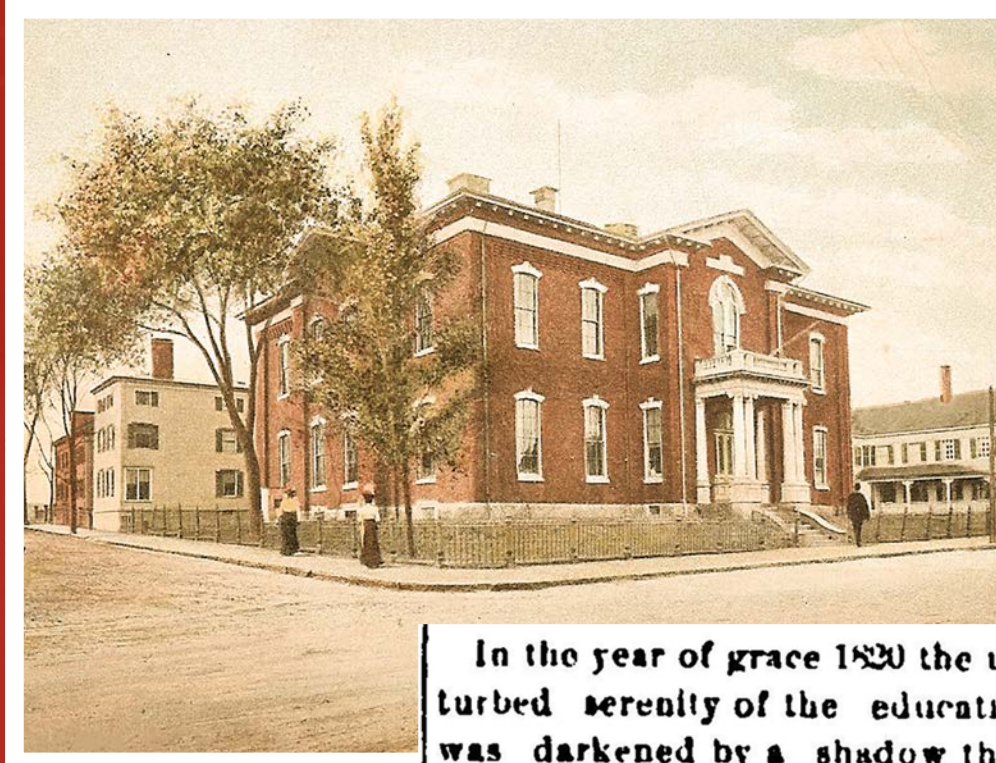
Newburyport’s education system helped shape one of Massachusetts’ most prominent civic leaders, Melnea Jones Cass. In 1901, Alfred and Mary Drew Jones migrated with Melnea and her siblings from Richmond, Virginia, to Boston seeking opportunity. When Mary died in 1905, Alfred sent their three daughters to be cared for by their aunt Ella Drew, a domestic servant in Newburyport. Ella arranged for her nieces to attend the Kelley School where Melnea distinguished herself as a high-achieving student. After graduating from the Kelley School, she left Newburyport and continued her studies elsewhere before returning to Boston, working as a domestic servant, and marrying Marshall Cass in 1917. Soon after, Melnea Cass began leading marches, organizing school sit-ins and boycotts, and preparing lawsuits against the Boston School Committee.

By the civil rights era, racial segregation, whether by law or by practice, was a national problem. A flood of school integration cases culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the decision of which outlawed segregation in public schools. Black lawyer and later Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall spoke about the victory when he visited Newburyport’s Congregation Ahavas Achim synagogue in 1958: “Once a generation has gone to school together, worked together, and lived together, prejudice will largely disappear.” This vision has not yet been realized. Black children and their allies continue to champion equal school rights, here and nationally. Their fight goes on.

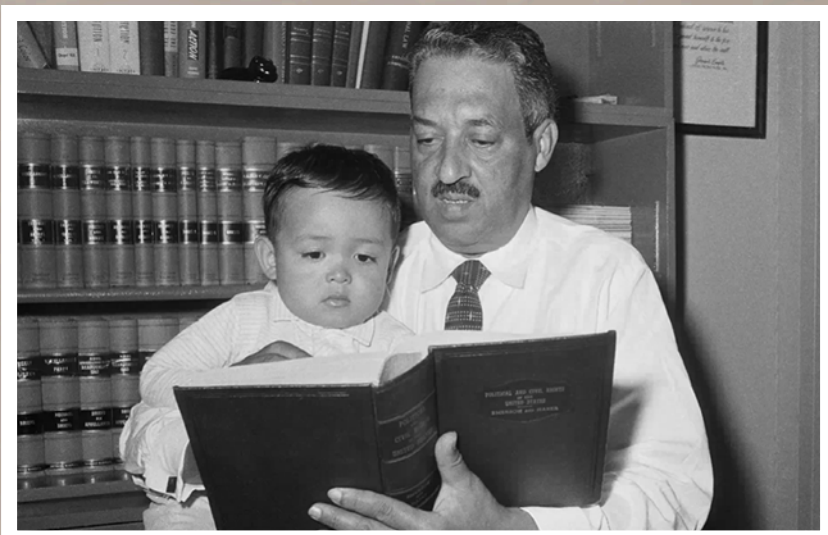
Text by Kabria Baumgartner, Geordie Vining, and Cyd Raschke (2023)

Fighting for Equal School Rights

For centuries, Black Newburyporters have struggled for the right of all children to high quality public schooling without regard to race.



In the year of grace 1820 the usually undisturbed serenity of the educational horizon was darkened by a shadow that for a time gave much uneasiness to the learned divines and other dignified men that were guardians of the schools. Some young ladies of Guinea, not satisfied with their educational privileges dared to present themselves at one of the female grammar schools. This caused much annoyance both to parents and school committee and after considerably talk the authorities voted that “girls of color be excluded from the female grammar schools.” The education of the colored children was a cause of much uneasiness to the town. The Female



LEFT FROM TOP:
Newburyport Kelley School
historic postcard c.1911
Courtesy of the Museum of Old Newbury

Excerpt from “Female Schools and Primary Schools” by O.B. Merrill, *Newburyport Daily Herald*, January 5, 1878
Courtesy of Newburyport Daily News

Thurgood Marshall reading to his son Thurgood, Jr. in 1958
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-112127

BACKGROUND IMAGE:
1913 Class Picture
Newburyport’s Davenport School
(on Congress Street)
Courtesy of Newburyport Public Library
Archival Center

Melnea Jones Cass

RIGHT: Melnea Cass
1969 portrait
Courtesy of Northeastern
University Archives,
A103-A006291

FAR RIGHT: Melnea Cass testifies at the
Massachusetts State House
c. 1970
Courtesy of Bay State Banner

