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GIS 101

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Abolitionist Movement in Boston: Proximity and Action

Section 1: Introduction

Boston's pre-Civil War abolitionist network displayed a powerful campaign to establish and expand the rights of African-Americans in the United States. While much has changed today, many modern activists are still trying to actualize the visions that "Colored Citizens" had in the 1800s of equal opportunity and protection for Black people in America. The social movement for racial equality in the 1800s organized using physical proximity that we rarely see today, and it was extremely effective in disturbing rampant white supremacy in the nation. In today's pervasive culture of individuality, activists can learn a lot from studying the communal nature and intimacy of Boston's abolitionist movement. Research questions guide my exploration of proximity. What is the spatial density of abolitionist activity in the city? Is the most activity in the Beacon Hill area? Do clusters of exist in other parts of the city? What historical factors would lead to this pattern? To what degree is each location preserved and recognized today, and what effect does that have on Boston's residents and visitors?

My goal for this project is to answer these questions and provide an accessible educational tool for people to learn about this period of Boston's history. A storymap offers the best mode to accomplish this goal because I am depicting not only where the abolitionist movement occurred but its main actors, circumstances, goals, and challenges. The interactive map is a focus of my project as a visual and descriptive educational tool.

Section 2: Data and Layers

This section introduces the data that was utilized in my project. A summary table of these layers is included in Section 5. Figures are shown after text desciptions.

1. Basemap. This layer, provided by the Leventhal Map Collection, provides an 1852 background for the storymap to take place. I chose this map because it shows individual building footprints and is recorded before the plan to fill in Back Bay. See *Figure 1*.
2. Community Locations. I obtained my list of important community locations by cross-referencing the National Parks Service inventory of Historic Heritage Sites, Stephen Kantrowitz's *More Than Freedom*, and other listed sources in the reference section. These locations represent where abolitionists organized, protested, and gathered strength as a community. See *Figure 2*.
3. City locations. I obtained my list of important city locations by cross-referencing the National Parks Service inventory of Historic Heritage Sites, Stephen Kantrowitz's *More Than Freedom*, and other listed sources in the reference section. These locations represent parts of the North End that were protest sites, jail houses, court rooms, and other frequently-visited sites by abolitionist activists and their counterparts. See *Figure 3*.
4. Business locations. I obtained my list of important Black-owned businesses by cross-referencing the National Parks Service inventory of Historic Heritage Sites, Stephen Kantrowitz's *More Than Freedom*, and other listed sources in the reference section. These locations represent the success of free Blacks in Boston in securing their own properties and incomes. These locations are also important because their customers were often Black, and would support the community by providing resources (Kantrowitz). See *Figure 4*.

5. Safe Houses and Prominent Figures. I am obtained this list by cross-referencing the National Parks Service inventory of Historic Heritage Sites, Stephen Kantrowitz's *More Than Freedom,* and other listed sources in the references section. These locations represent the underground railroad network in the city, as well as the homes of prominent figures. See *Figure 5*.
6. Events. I obtained my list of event locations by cross-referencing the National Parks Service inventory of Historic Heritage Sites, Stephen Kantrowitz's *More Than Freedom,* and other listed sources in the references section. These locations represent a moment in time where a significant event took place. See *Figure 6.*
7. Merged Layer with All Points. In order to complete analyses and calculations, I needed a layer with every point. See *Figure 7.*
8. Dedications. I created a layer to show dedications that were erected to commemorate events or figures. These structures somewhat reconcile the lack of preservation. I gathered the locations and descriptions for these sites by referencing The Crimson, Friends of the Public Gardens, Crispus Attucks museum, and more sources listed in the reference section. See *Figure 8.*
9. Preservation and recognition. I created my own criteria for determining the level of preservation and recognition for each location, except for events. Full preservation means that most or all of the building remains consistent to its previous state, is recognizable, and is easily accessible by the public. Partial preservation means that most or all of the building is still standing but it is not accessible by the public. No preservation means that the building has been demolished and other developments stand in its place. Full recognition means that there is a marker at the site to indicate its historical significance,

and popular online sources have published easily-accessible information about the site. Partial recognition means that there is no indication at the site of its historical significance, but popular online sources have published easily-accessible information about the site. No recognition means that there is no indication at the site of its historical significance, and online sources of information about the site are not easily accessible. See *Figure 9*.

10. Wards. I referenced the Leventhal Map Collection's "1851 George Smith Plan of Boston" to create my own wards layer. See *Figure 10*.

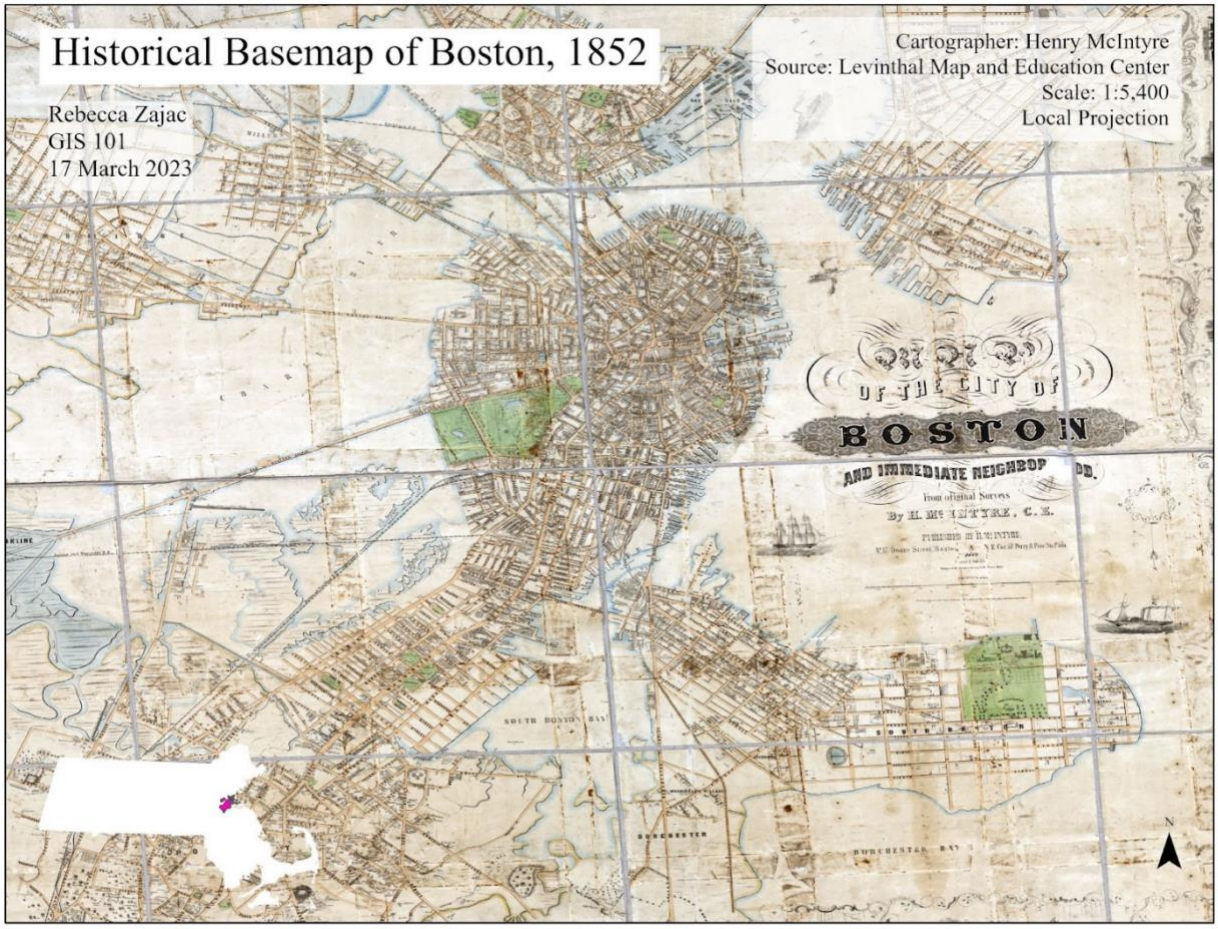

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

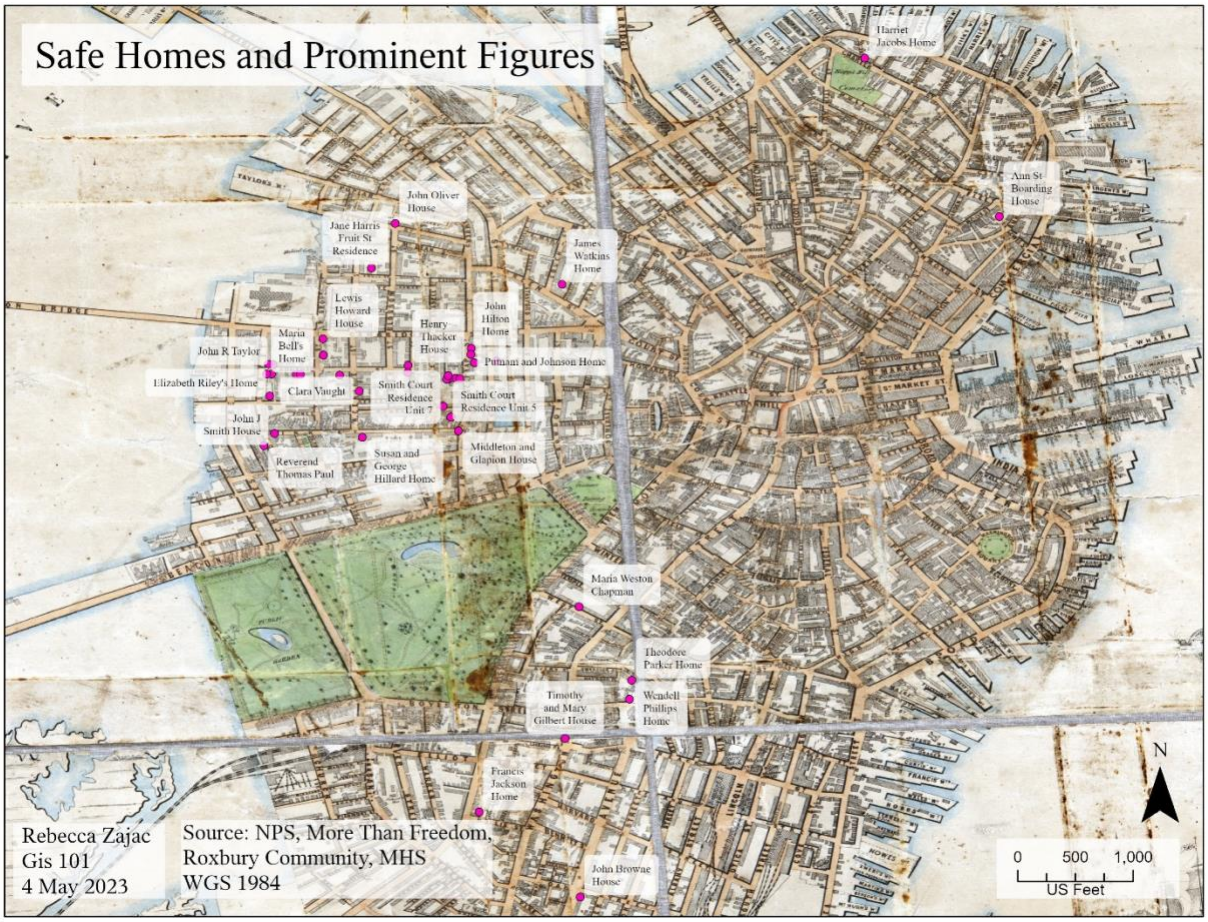

Figure 5

Figure 6

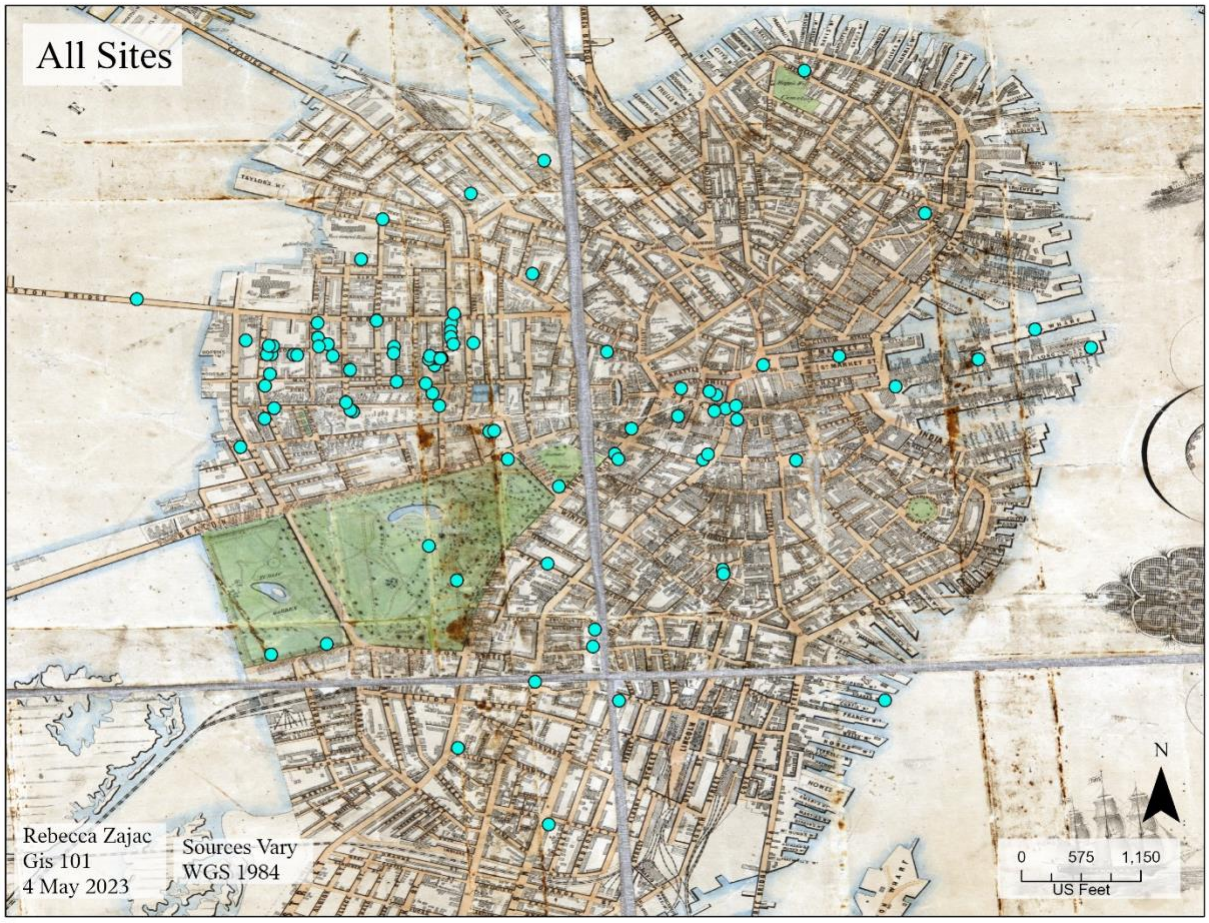

Figure 7

Figure 8

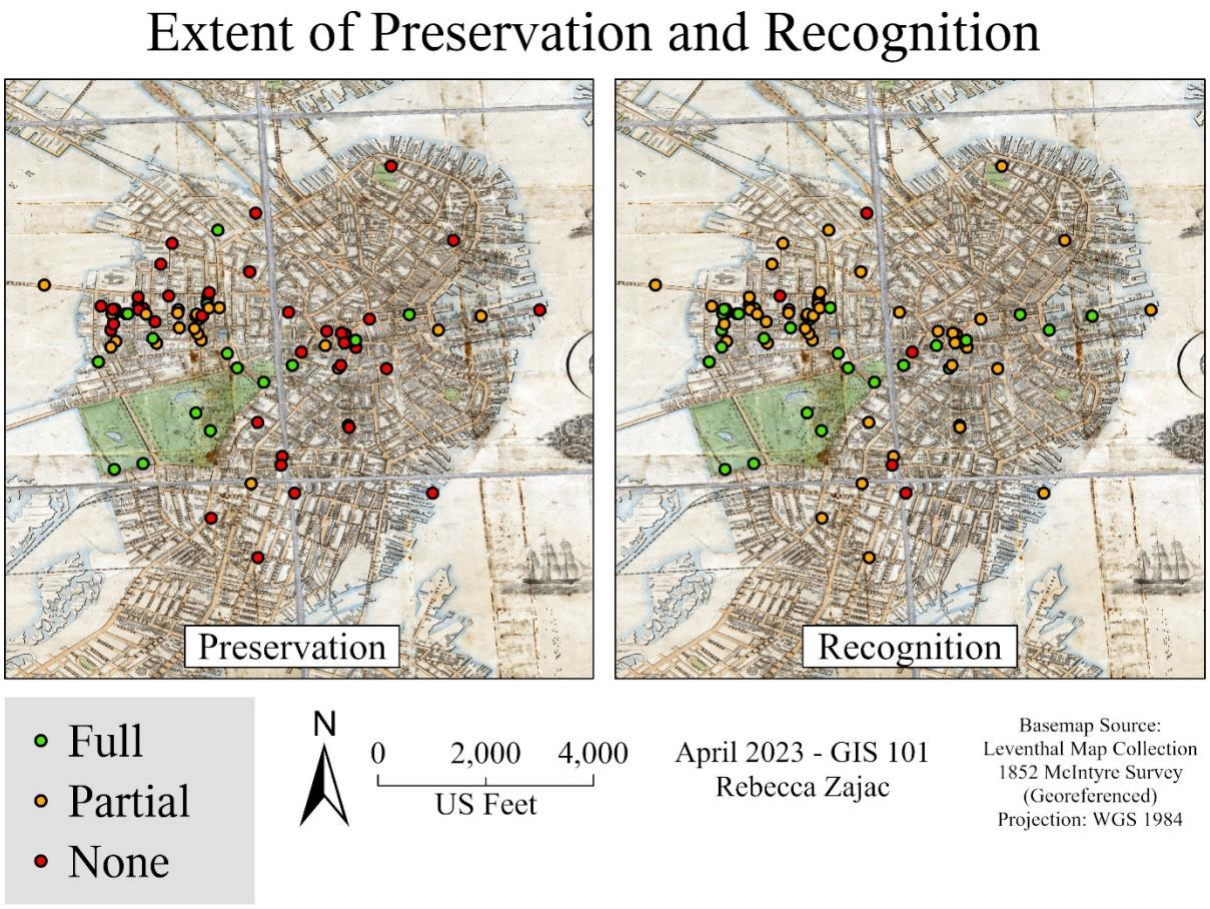

Figure 9

1851 Ward Boundaries of Boston

WGS 1984 (Georeferenced Basemap)

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Basemap Source: Leventhal Map Collection 1852 McIntyre Survey
Ward Boundary Reference: Leventhal Map Collection 1851 George Smith Plan of Boston

Figure 10

Section 3: Methods

Basemap. The basemap I found was georeferenced already. I downloaded the TIF file and inserted it into ArcGIS Pro as a raster.

Data collection. I stayed organized by keeping a separate list of all of my locations to check off as I included them in my data. To plot my first points, I first created a spreadsheet with the following fields: title, latitude, longitude, type, address, description, preservation, recognition, source. I used Google Maps to find latitudes and longitudes. This method of data collection was useful for plotting points that corresponded to preserved locations or had a trackable address on today's streets. I saved the spreadsheet as a CSV file. In ArcGIS Pro, I created a feature class from that CSV file. Using the X-Y Table to Point function, I translated my attribute table into points. I plotted the rest of my points manually, building my attribute table within GIS rather than importing it. In a new feature class, I used the create points function to map the rest of my points. I found out the locations I needed by referencing the National Parks Service, the *Atlas of Boston History*, Roxbury Community College's Library resources, Massachusetts Historical Society, and Boston College's Robert Morris map. The fields in this layer's attribute table were: title, address, preservation, recognition, description, source, and type.

Analyses. When I was finished with manual plotting, I merged my two data layers into one shapefile using the Merge tool in Data Management. I also created a Wards layer from a new feature class and used the Create tool to draw my own polygons. I renamed the shapes to be consistent with the ward numbers. Then I was ready to perform analyses. I created a spatial join between the wards layer and points layer and selected "count" as the merge type. I selected graduated colors symbology according to the join count to display a new layout with the total number of abolitionist sites per ward. See Figure 11. I used this spatial join to calculate site

density per ward, as well. I added an area field calculated by square miles. I divided the points in each ward by the ward's area to find the number of sites per square mile. I selected graduated colors symbology again in a new layout to display the number of sites per square mile in each ward. See *Figure 12*.

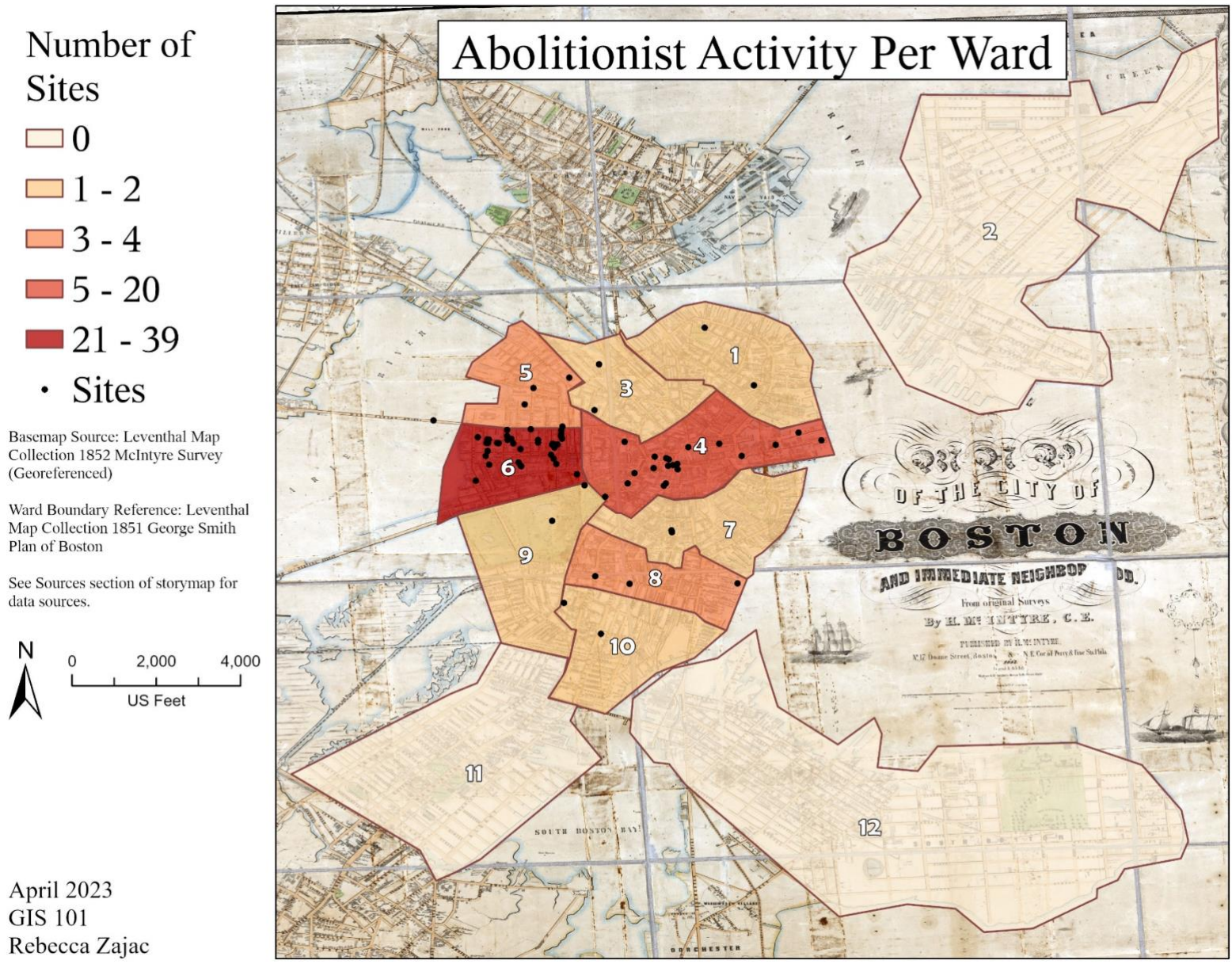

Figure 11

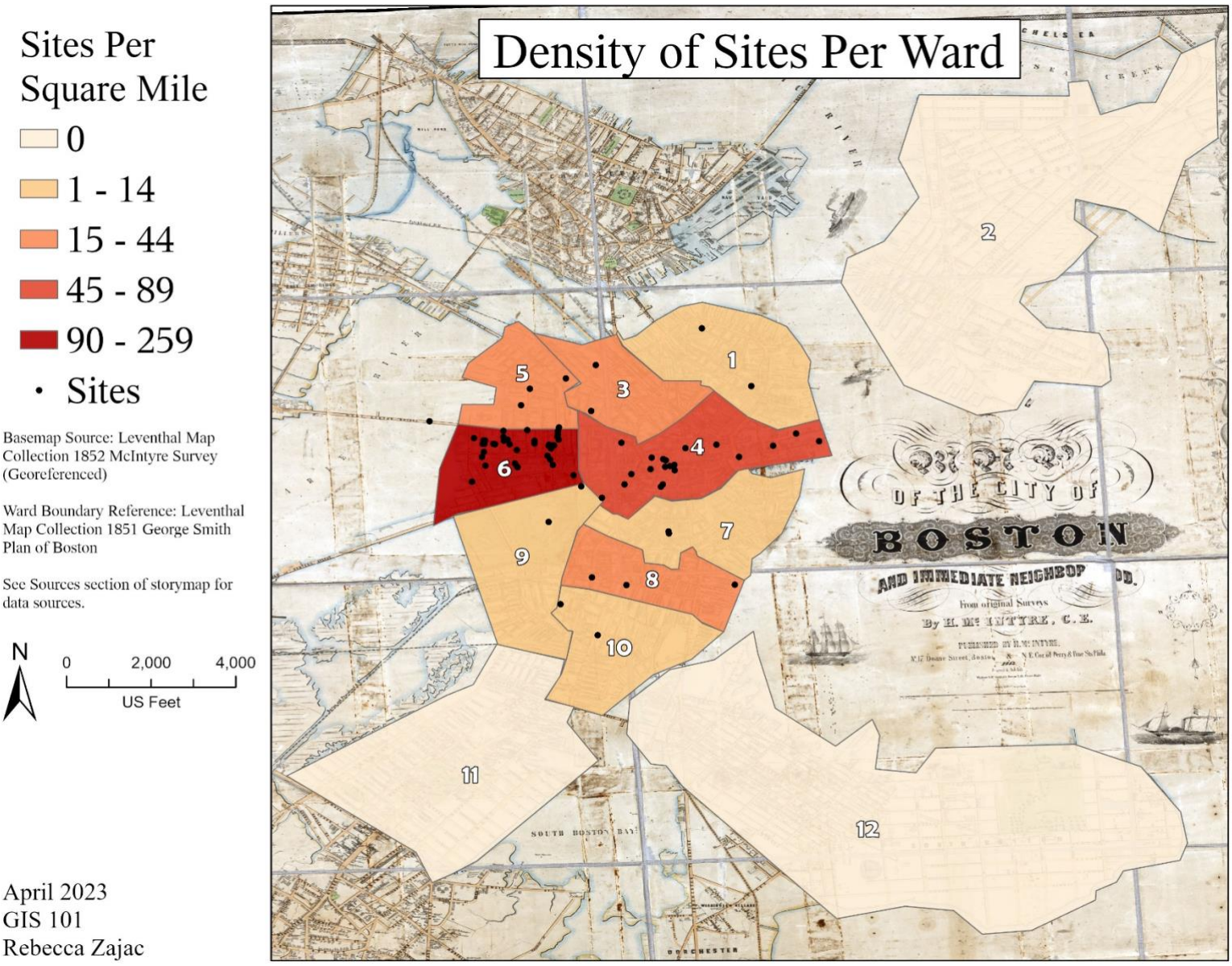

Figure 12

Interactive Map. To export a feature class from ArcGIS Pro into ArcGIS Online, I needed to give each layer its own map in ArcGIS Pro. Otherwise, I would run into errors trying to export it as a web layer. The basemap as a TIF file was not compatible with ArcGIS Online, so I had to convert the feature class to a KML file first. However, I needed to crop the basemap and export it as a smaller KML in order for the resolution to translate. I created a new feature layer and polygon to the smaller extent of the basemap I wanted to export, then used the Raster Clip tool to

that extent. I converted the clipped extent to a KML and imported that into my contents on ArcGIS Online. I created a new map for the points layer and exported that as a web layer. On the online Map Viewer, I added this points layer over the basemap and explored with pop-ups and symbology settings. I wanted each point to pop up with an accompanying image, but there was no way to add photo attachments through the online interface. The pop-up configuration panel needed a link for each image. I guessed that for each point to have a unique image, I would have to insert a new field in the layer's attribute table on ArcGIS Pro and put the links there. I had collected a folder of images by combing through 29 sources, including the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston Public Library, Massachusetts Digital Commonwealth, Historic New England, and more. One by one, I converted the images into URLs using an online converter. In order to update the layer on ArcGIS Online, I needed to export the layer again as a web layer overwrite and re-import it into my online contents. But the field connection to image URL did not work. I found out by doing research that the images had to be saved and published in my ArcGIS online profile, and the URL should originate from there. One by one, I saved the images onto a new folder in ArcGIS online and shared them publicly. I then inserted the new URLs into the image field, published the web layer again, inserted the web layer again, inserted it into Map Viewer again, and adjusted pop ups and symbology again.

Storymap Configuration. I outlined my storymap on a separate document to plan out how I would use different design tools to keep the storymap interesting. On ArcGIS Storymaps, I created a new theme and assembled the layout. I divided my storymap into the following sections: Introduction, Historical Context, Interactive Map, Spotlight (Details), Networks of Resistance, Spatial Analyses, Preservation and Recognition, Conclusion, and Sources. The idea was to have balance between zoomed-out perspectives of the movement and zoomed-in

perspectives. I synthesized my historical research and personal interests to write the Introduction section, and added an image slider. I added a timeline and quotes in the Historical Context section. I inserted the interactive map and wrote an introduction for it and disclaimer. I inserted a slideshow complete with pictures, descriptions, and quotes for the Spotlight section to add a more personal essence to my map. The Networks of Resistance section offered individual maps of points broken down by type, similar to Section 2 of this paper but using different layouts. I thought this would be useful because points were all grouped together in the interactive map. I added a Tunnels and Passageways subsection to display another layer that I had created for the Holmes Alleyway. See *Figure 13*. I intended to have a more expansive map of these passageways, but I could only find data on this one. I added a slideshow of pictures from within the alleyway, which I visited.

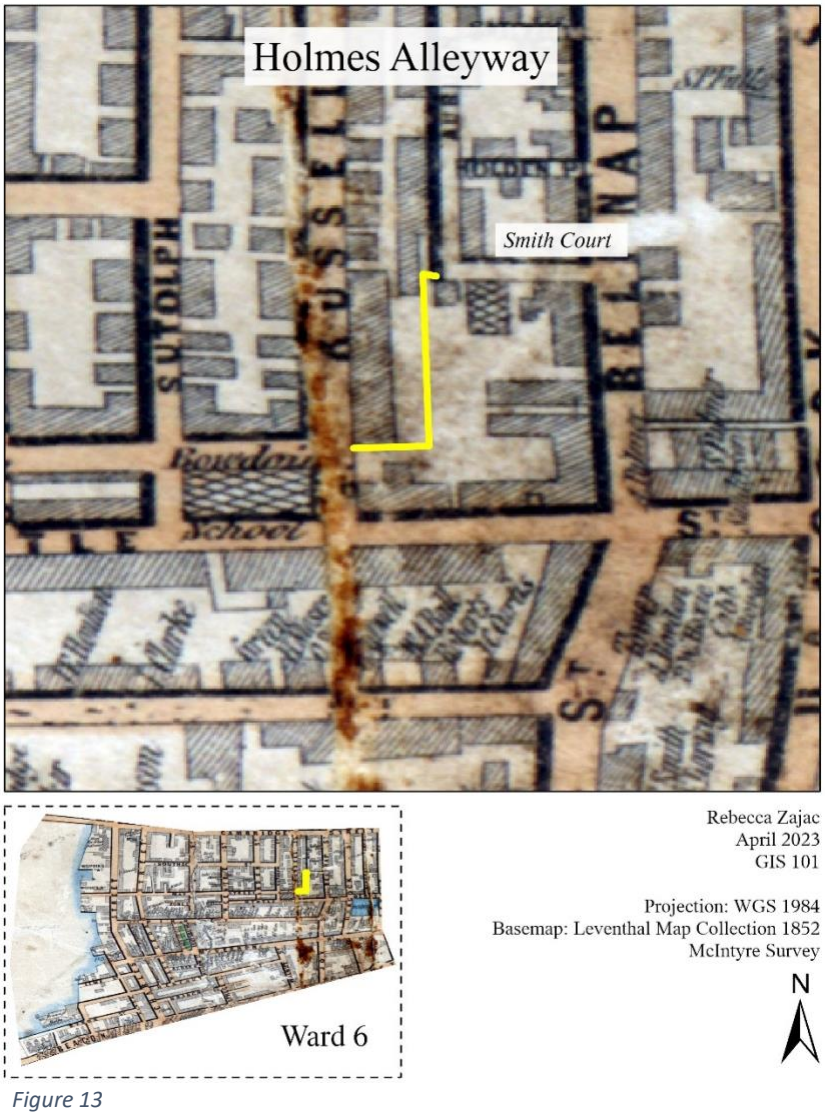

Figure 13

I inserted my Spatial Analyses and Preservation and Recognition maps and wrote about them. The interactive map has a few more data points than the analyses because my history professor had some suggestions to add, but these were mostly statues erected after the movement, and I wanted the analyses to focus more on sites that were active pre-Civil War. I instead included those new points in their own map, as seen in *Figure 8*, in the Preservation and Recognition section. I clipped the Leventhal basemap and ArcGIS Pro basemap to the same extent and exported them to create a sliding comparison in the storymap. See *Figure 14.* The conclusion of my storymap includes reflections, takeaways, and calls to action.

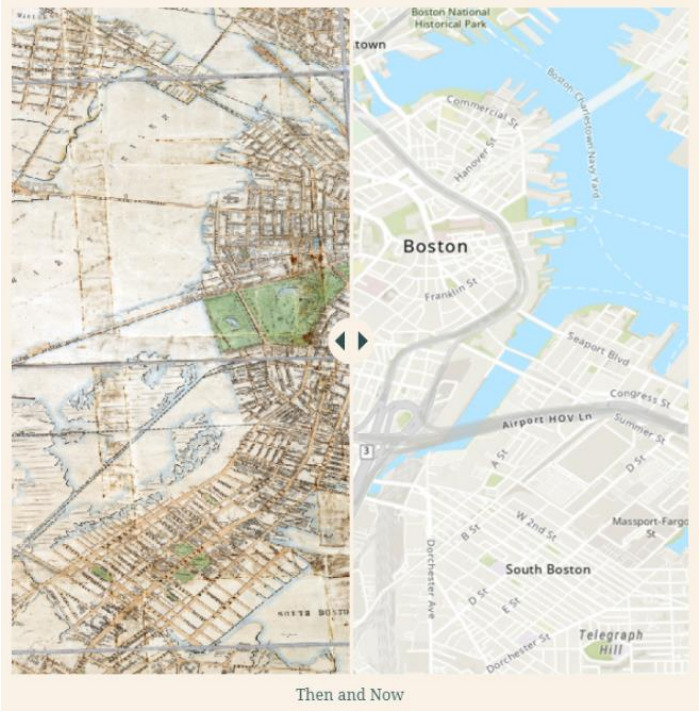

Figure 14

Section 4: Results

Ward 6 is the most dense with abolitionist activity and has the most locations. This is because Ward 6 had the largest Black population in the city. Many of the first buildings on Beacon Hill housed Boston's elites. But the northern slope was seen as undesirable because sailors and British soldiers would often stay there. An excerpt from *A Brief Account of the*

Origins and Progresses of the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes (1818) scrutinizes the area for being racially diverse, loud, confusing, and full of pests and prostitutes. While the north slope of Beacon Hill had a rough reputation amongst some whites, it had a rich culture full of people who propelled the city and nation towards greater inclusion. The closeness of their community turned out to be vital for the abolitionist movement. Momentum would fall apart if activists within it did not have shelter, food, and relative safety. And if everyone was spread out, it would be hard to organize protests, rescues, marches, gatherings, and more, because methods of communication were limited. Furthermore, there is a camaraderie that comes with sharing space. Beacon Hill's streets are narrow and dense, and there is not much space for solitude. Relationships, if they were not already brought on by circumstance, would be encouraged just by proximity. The only remaining escape alleyway being still nestled behind Smith Court might not be a coincidence. Nowhere else in the city parallels such a deep connection to the underground railroad and abolitionism.

However, there are clusters of activity outside of Beacon Hill. Activists' lives spread outside of their place of residence. Notable locations beyond Beacon Hill, clustered in the central area of the city are law offices, court houses, and publishing sites. This commercial cluster drove the logistical and outreach aspects of activism. It also displayed the possibility of integration. Planners and developers also designed the city according to occupational segregation. For that reason, it makes sense for law offices to be near courthouses and publishers to be clustered together.

There is less activity in outer wards, and there is a belt of activity across Wards 6 and 4, from the wharfs to Longfellow Bridge. Downtown Boston was busier than peripheral areas, partly because there was the most packed into those spaces. City blocks in wards 2, 11, and 12

are more spread out, which might not facilitate as much activity. Boston was also expanding during the 1800s. Older buildings might be more affordable than new housing or offices due to the facilities being rundown. Transportation could also be a reason for this trend of concentrated activity in Wards. To walk a long distance to organize or attend gatherings is first of all a large time commitment, and also a safety concern for abolitionists who could be targeted by violent anti-abolitionists.

The comparison between preservation and recognition shows a level of recognition much stronger than preservation. Error in this analysis might occur because I did not specifically survey the condition of each location and compare their current state with past images. Many such images are not available. Many of the prominent sites of the past have disappeared from our landscapes due to redevelopment and construction. Thankfully, however, Beacon Hill is much more preserved than it could have been. Following the demolition of most of Ward 5 for an "urban renewal" project, residents of Beacon Hill formed a preservation alliance and successfully lobbied for the preservation of their district.

Section 5: Conclusion and Discussion

Maps, while based on research and history, are abstract representations and simplifications. The conversations, personal exchanges, and energy on the ground during this movement cannot be captured in a birds-eye view. Due to time limitations, the map is not fully extensive and does not include every actor, location, event, or allies in the community. If I had more time on this project, there is much more I would want to do. First, I would have liked to map pathways that were taken during important events, such as the rescue of Shadrach Minkins, the rendition of Anthony Burns and Thomas Sims, and the parade of the 54th Regiment. Why did they take these routes? Why were different streets hold unique significance? Second, it would

also be interesting to use a buffer analysis to display the proximity of members of the Vigilance Committees to its headquarters. How far would a member have to walk to attend a meeting? Are there more members closer to the headquarters? Third, I would like to map the distribution of financial resources through the Vigilance Committee. Well-off benefactors gave funds to the Committee, which would then pay people for their role in the underground railroad. Was this a trend from white, wealthy benefactors to mostly Black recipients who run boarding houses and rescues? Would that be a unique system? There may be many creative processes at play that we can learn much from today.

One thing I want my storymap viewers to take from this is how bittersweet such reflections are. Inspiration is met with sorrow when we learn that even though Massachusetts was more progressive than other states, it still harbored intense racism that impacted every aspect of the lives of its Black population. Safe houses, community centers, lecture sites, businesses, churches, and other locations poked holes in the fabric of White Supremacy that was draped across the nation.

Another message I want to share with this project is: *pay attention*. We pass by so many significant sites on our visits to Boston, and might not even realize it. It is worthwhile to devote more attention to strengthening the recognition of this history. In a city with so many students of history and artists, there could be a city-wide project to sketch and illustrate ground-level depictions of past locations. A catalogue of drawings and paintings could be an imaginative historical record of sorts. People could write historical fiction or plays about this time period. Imagine a dialogue between the actors of this time. What do they talk about on the day-to-day? What are their hobbies? How do they comfort each other and rally each other to action? The

Broadway show, *Hamilton*, proves that depictions like this can be popular. Recognition is an issue that stretches beyond plaques. It really only means something if it reaches your heart.

Abolitionists in Boston were ambitious enough to strike fear in the South. While our lives are short, we can have a huge impact. It does not matter if some attempts to spark systemic change do not carry through immediate results. As long as we try, we send a message. When activists tried to rescue Anthony Burns from the Boston Court House, they were unsuccessful. But causing a riot, turning towards an issue and giving it attention, and mourning the loss of Burns during a march down State St, was powerful. There was huge social and legal backlash against the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 in Massachusetts because protests pointed out that the law was inhumane and unjust. Resistance can wake people up from a stupor of complicity.

We have agency even when the system cannot be changed at once. There were so many boarding houses because if someone sought shelter, others would take them in. Orators would risk their lives amidst mobs to envision a better, more inclusive country. Lawmakers such as Sumner would chip away at the Slave Power despite being assaulted. A select few, if they have strong bonds, can send ripples throughout the nation. Do not underestimate your impact or your agency.

Think radically, and engage in community. Where do you gather? Who is your community? To what extent, day to day, do you feel disconnected or connected to what you care about? Make connections with your neighbors. Embrace density and urbanism. Participate in mutual aid. Let your emotions drive your action. Push forward with immediatism. The action-driven Black activists were unpopular in the nation in the 1800s, but we consider them noble and honorable now. Many believe that violence against slaveholders was justified, whether in the Civil War, insurrections, or rebellions such as those led by John Brown. What about the

immediate activists of today for abolition of the police? Press coverage of the George Floyd protests viewed violent expressions of fear and frustration as reprehensible, and even worthy of discrediting the validity of the movement. Is this really fair, given the historical context that since the conception of the nation, Black people have never been treated fairly? When murders continue of innocent Black people, and peaceful protests are met with the national guard, how long can we expect silence and cooperation? We can try to change the structure from within, passing laws and amendments that introduce new governmental goals and objectives. And we can push the boundaries of what to expect of our government from the outside.