

HISTORIC WALKING TOUR OF EXETER, NH



We exist to advance relationships among people of different racial identities, increase understanding, and reduce racial bias.

PRESENTED BY:



The Racial Unity Team invites you to walk in the footsteps of Exeter’s earlier generations and explore the racial history of our town—the conflicts, concessions and changes that have taken place over time.

This tour will explore how racial identity has shaped Exeter’s history and will hopefully serve to open a dialogue that will help shape its future.



The following pages include information about each of 12 stops along this tour, which begins in the center of downtown Exeter.

1: Start at the corner of Water & Front Streets:

Town Hall – Abraham Lincoln spoke to a packed crowd of local residents at the Exeter Town Hall on March 3, 1860. The speech laid out careful arguments for blocking the extension of slavery into the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. The State of New Hampshire never formally abolished slavery, although there were no enslaved people listed after the 1840 census. Abolition became the law of the land

in 1865 with passage of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution. New Hampshire did not have any laws prohibiting intermarriage and did not have legal segregation. However, businesses were allowed to deny service, and there were no protections for fair housing or hiring. Minstrel shows were a common and popular entertainment at Exeter's Town Hall into the mid-20th century.

2: Walk one block south along Front Street:

Congregational Church of Exeter – In February of 1845 Exeter politician Amos Tuck led a meeting at the Congregational Church vestry to demand changes to the Democratic Party platform. Tuck and like-minded members, calling themselves Independent Democrats, wrote a series of resolutions opposed to the expansion of slavery into the new western territories and particularly Texas. Tuck would later galvanize the Free Soil members of this party with other political party factions to form the anti-slavery Republican Party.

The pew used by Abraham Lincoln during his 1860 visit to Exeter was moved to this building after the Second Parish Church merged with the Congregational Church of Exeter in 1938.

3: Continue along Front Street to corner of Spring Street:

First Baptist Church of Exeter – Organized in 1800, this was the first congregation in Exeter to admit Black members. In 1818 the southeast corner of the new meeting house farther down Spring Street was reserved for “colored people.” When the Water Street meeting house was built in 1833, two pews were owned by Black families—Leonard White and his wife, and Rufus Cutler and family. In 2016 the church, at the corner of Front & Spring Streets since 1875, hired its first African-American pastor, Rev. Dr. Lillian J. Buckley.

4: Continue one-half block to drive on right near PEA sign:

Phillips Exeter Academy – Exeter's public schools were integrated, if only because it was impractical to segregate. Phillips Exeter Academy accepted students of color, although housing was kept separate for many years. In 1864 three students from Kentucky withdrew from the Academy rather than attend school with Emanuel Sullavou, a Black student from New Bedford, Massachusetts. Sullavou finished his studies in Exeter and went on to Harvard and Harvard Law School.

5: Walk down drive, right on Abbott Way, then left on Spring Street. Continue to small park straight across Water Street:

Corner of Spring & Water Streets – Exeter citizens of African descent supported one another even when society at large did not. Park Street, located two blocks north of this park, once known locally as “Katy's Lane,” was the home (no longer standing) of Catherine Merrill, daughter of a Black Revolutionary War soldier named Juba Merrill. At her death in 1852, Merrill left a bequest to the town “for the benefit of deserving colored persons.” Many Black families lived and worked near here and in the area along the river.

There were enslaved people in Exeter. Census records indicate that in the year 1767 the population of 1,690 included 50 enslaved people. Nine years later, in 1776, the population of 1,741 listed 38 enslaved people. In 1790, Exeter's population had the highest percentage of free Black residents. Many were Revolutionary War pensioners and their families—4.8% of Exeter's population was of African descent. By comparison, 2010 census reports Exeter's racial makeup as: 95.5% white, 2.0% Asian, 1.6% mixed race, 0.6% African-American, .2% other, and 0.01% Native American.

6: Walk one block along Water Street toward town center; stop at park benches and look across at the Ladd-Gilman House (Independence Museum):

As some of the early settlers established their own wealth, they accumulated slaves. One of those enslaved people lived at the Ladd-Gilman House during Nicholas Gilman, Sr.'s residency. Gilman's probate inventory included "a Negro boy nam'd Bob" valued at £15.

In 1834, the women of Exeter joined a national campaign petitioning the US Congress to outlaw slavery and the slave trade in Washington, D.C. Congress chose not to act on these petitions and in 1836 passed a gag order to table all discussions about slavery.

In the 1960s, 191 Water Street, near where you are standing, was the location of a small diner called Harold's Place, run by Harold Ward, formerly of Brooklyn, NY. Ward taught his children, "Racists are either ignorant or stupid. Ignorant people can be taught..." Mr. Ward's descendants still live in Exeter.

7: Continue one block to 127 Water Street:

Historic Black-Owned Building – A plaque on this building commemorates Black-owned businesses. Institutional racism prevented most African-Americans from finding employment in most of the town's large industries. Instead, some people became independent businessmen. Rufus Cutler (son of Revolutionary War Veteran Tobias Cutler), his wife Anna Cilly Cutler and their son, John Cutler, owned a series of businesses on Water Street that included two restaurants, two dry goods stores and a billiard hall. John's sister, Harriet, married businessman George Harris of Philadelphia, and together they ran a grocery store. Another son, Nathaniel Cutler, was a local barber. After a series of fires in the Exeter downtown in 1872, Cutler and Harris rebuilt on this site but shortly after moved their businesses to Hampton Beach.

8: Walk to corner, cross street, turn left, and stop on or near String Bridge, overlooking Exeter River:

Exeter Manufacturing Company – Look in a downstream direction and notice the brick smokestack. This was the site of the Exeter Manufacturing Company, a cotton textile mill that began production in 1830.

The mill owners would not hire Black employees. During the first decades of its operations, the mill gave preference to local farm girls and workers from England or Scotland, despite the influx of labor available from Ireland during the 1840s and 50s. After the Civil War, Irish and French-Canadian workers were hired. In 1900, immigrant workers from Poland and Germany, many of whom did not speak English, joined a workforce that remained all white. Lack of employment opportunities was one reason for the decline in Exeter's African-American population in the 19th century.

9: Turn right at Library, walk through parking lot to monument in park along Exeter River:

Freshwater Exeter River meets the saltwater Squamscott River just downstream from this point. This location drew people to live in the area. The native Squamscotts came seasonally to the falls to fish and to hunt in the nearby forest. When John Wheelwright and his followers arrived from England in 1638, an agreement was signed between the two groups. Drafted by Wheelwright, the deed protected agricultural, fishing and hunting grounds for the Natives. Wehenownoit, the Sagamore (or chief) of the local Squamscot tribe, agreed to sign the document with his pictograph. Within only a few years, it became evident that the English and Natives used the land very differently. The lumber industry, with its requisite dams and mills, spoiled the river and deforested traditional hunting grounds. Wehenownoit and his people largely abandoned the area within a decade. The monument before you here in Founder's Park was erected 1988 to commemorate Exeter's 350th anniversary as an organized town.

10: Walk to Great Bridge. Cross the bridge, walk to corner and cross Water Street. Turn right and stop near 42 Water Street:

Where a boutique and Chinese restaurant now stand once stood a Chinese hand laundry. Nearly every New England town had a laundry operated by a Chinese proprietor. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented further immigration from China to the United States and prevented anyone of Chinese descent from becoming a legal US citizen. Mr. Chin Lee owned and operated the laundry on Water Street in the early 20th century until his death—in the shop—in 1925 at the age of 62. He was never able to bring his wife or children to this country. His brother arrived in Exeter to collect his body after his death.

11: Look across the street at Mayer Building, 53 Water St:

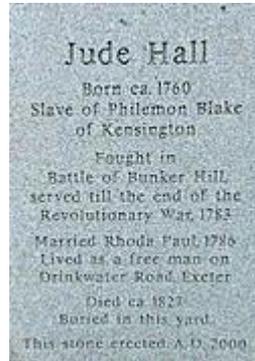
Site of the Former Ioka Theater – The name *Ioka* is said to be a native word for playground, although it has never been traced to any local Abenaki dialect. A contest to name the new theater was won by a young cashier deeply involved in Campfire Girls. The theater opened in 1915 with a heavily publicized viewing of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. The film, based on the book The Clansman, presented a romanticized view of slavery and the Ku Klux Klan. To publicize the film, owner Edward Mayer had two horsemen ride

around town in KKK costumes. Although the NAACP took exception to the film, there is no evidence that it disturbed any Exeter residents.

12: Walk to Bandstand near corner of Front & Water Streets:

In 1989 a local Ku Klux Klan recruiter staged a march through downtown Exeter. In June 1990, the KKK picketed a Racial Unity Day rally. Exeter took notice, and in August when the KKK marched in full regalia through town, (Imagine that!) they were faced with closed businesses and the bandstand festooned with yellow ribbons, balloons, shirts, and paper tulips that read “Klanbuster.” Public rejection of the Klan’s presence resulted in the recruiter leaving New Hampshire in 1991.

Additional Historic Site: You may also wish to drive to see the cemetery marker of Jude Hall, who was born a slave c. 1760, fought in the Battle of Bunker Hill, served till the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, and lived out his life as a free man in Exeter until his death in 1827. The marker is located in the Winter Street Cemetery, near the intersection of Winter Street and Railroad Avenue, west of town center.



Thank you for taking our self-guided Historic Tour of Exeter. For more information about the Racial Unity Team’s work for racial justice and equity and how you can make your tax-deductible donation, please check out our website:

www.racialunityteam.com

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