Thomas McKeller's Boston

Contributions by Allentza Michel and Valerie Stephens

1884
Isabella Stewart Gardner meets John Singer Sargent.

1888
John Singer Sargent paints Isabella's portrait.

John Singer Sargent, *Isabella Stewart Gardner*, 1888
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

1890
Thomas McKeller is born in Wilmington, North Carolina.

A mob stands in front of the destroyed printing press of the *Daily Record*, an African American-owned and -edited newspaper in Wilmington, North Carolina, 10 November 1898
Cabinet card by H. Cronenberg. Courtesy of New Hanover County Public Library, North Carolina Room

1898
Alarmed by Black political and busniss success, vigilantes intimidate Black voters and rampage through Wilmington, North Carolina, killing Black citizens and destroying their businesses.

1899
North Carolina introduces the state's first Jim Crow laws, legalizing and enforcing racial segregation.

1900
Educator and reformer Booker T. Washington founds the National Negro Business League in Boston to promote the interests of Black-owned businesses, with the goal of establishing an economic network as a path to social equality. It continues to operate today as the National Negro Business League.

1901
Businessman and civil rights activist William Monroe Trotter founds the *Boston Guardian*, the first Black independent weekly newspaper. The *Guardian* was most famous for its editorials, in which Trotter denounced segregation and attacked Booker T. Washington for his conservative ideology.

1903
Isabella opens her museum to the public.

1906
Julia O. Henson, Cornelia Robinson, Annie W. Young, Fannie R. Contine, Jestina A. Johnson, Sylvia Fern, and Hibernia Waddell formally incorporate the Harriet Tubman House at 25 Holyoke Street in Boston's South End as a place of lodging for Black women who migrate to Boston from the South. The organization continues today on Columbus Avenue as part of the United South End Settlements.

1913
Thomas McKeller is recorded in Boston for the first time.

Executive Committee of the National Negro Business League, about 1910. Booker T. Washington is seated, second from the left.
Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-B2- 2055-13

1915
Black musicians form the American Federation of Musicians Union Local 535 in the South End, registering well-known local and national jazz artists. Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Chick Webb, Earl Hines, and Jimmie Lunceford were all members and frequently played at nightclubs and hotels in Boston.

1916
Thomas McKeller and John Singer Sargent meet at the Hotel Vendome and begin working together.

1918
Thomas McKeller is drafted into military service during World War I and trains in a Black infantry battalion from September until December 7. The war ends before he can be sent overseas.

1921
John Singer Sargent completes the first phase of the rotunda murals at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

John Singer Sargent gives Isabella Stewart Gardner the drawings of Thomas McKeller.

The Hotel Vendome

1924
Thomas McKeller begins working at the United States Post Office on Burlington Avenue.

Isabella Stewart Gardner dies.

A. Philip Randolph, founder of the union of Sleeping Car Porters
Boston Globe

1925
John Singer Sargent completes the second phase of the rotunda murals at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He dies in the same year.

1925
A. Phillip Randolph forms and leads the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first predominantly Black labor union. Many Boston men worked for the Pullman Car Company, the single largest employer of Black men in the country in the 1920s and '30s. In 1986, a nine-foot-tall statue of Randolph was installed in the Back Bay MBTA station to recognize his impact on the fight for civil rights.

1933
Community activist and "First Lady of Roxbury" Melnea Cass participates in protests against Boston department stores that refused to hire Black women as salesgirls. In 1981, Melnea Cass Boulevard in nearby Lower Roxbury is named in her honor.

Allan Rohan Crite, *On Old Northampton Street*, Boston, 1939
Boston Athenaeum

1934
Thomas McKeller marries Nevrina (Rena or Reena) Elizabeth Meads.

1936
Artist Allan Crite graduates from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Crite spends most of his career as an illustrator in the planning department of the Boston Naval Shipyards but is best-known for his paintings depicting the daily life of Boston's Black community. Crite met Isabella Stewart Gardner when he was about ten years old and continued to visit the museum for the rest of his life.

1941
Thomas McKeller takes the federal employee oath of loyalty as per the terms of the Hatch Act, which prohibited membership in any group advocating the overthrow of the government (and targeted members of the Communist Party).

1941
Malcolm Little moves to Roxbury to live with his sister Ella at her home on Dale Street. He spends his teenage years in Boston before leaving in the early 1950s. As Malcolm X, he went on to become one of the most militant, influential, and controversial activists of the civil rights movement.

1942
Thomas McKeller registers for the World War II draft.

1947
Joseph L. Walcott is the first Black American to own a nightclub in Boston with the opening of Wally's Paradise at 428 Massachusetts Avenue. It is one of the oldest continually operating jazz clubs in the country and presents live music at its current location at 427 Massachusetts Avenue.

Malcolm X in front of the Malcolm X Ella Little Collins House in Roxbury, 1941

1949
Social workers Muriel and Otto Snowden, along with community activist Melnea Cass, open Freedom House, a community nonprofit, at 151 Humboldt Sreet in Roxbury with the goal of promoting racial equality, particularly through access to education for low-income students of color.

The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Roxbury

1950
Educator Elma Lewis opens the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Roxbury to provide visual and performing arts education for the Black community in Boston. She later founded the National Center of Afro-American Artists, an organization that included the school and local arts groups as well as a museum.

1951
Martin Luther King Jr. enrolls at Boston University, earning his doctorate in systematic theology in 1955. During his time in Boston, Dr. King lived in the South End and met his future wife, Coretta King, who was studying opera at the New England Conservatory of Music.

Bill Russell practicing a free-throw, about 1953–56

1954
The Supreme Court rules that the racial segregation of children in schools is unconstitutional in the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

1956
Basketball superstar Bill Russell begins playing center for the Boston Celtics, launching a thirteen-year career in which he helped the team win eleven NBA championships. In the same year, he also captains the gold-medal winning U.S. National basketball team at the Summer Olympics. As a player-coach for the Celtics from 1966 to 1969, he became the first Black coach in North American professional sports.

1962
Thomas McKeller dies.

1964
The passage of the Civil Rights Act outlaws segregation in public spaces as well as employment discrimination based on race, religion, sex, or national origin.

Despite the Civil Rights Act, Boston continued to struggle with racial inequities and still does today. We all can learn from our past to build a more inclusive Boston for the next generation.