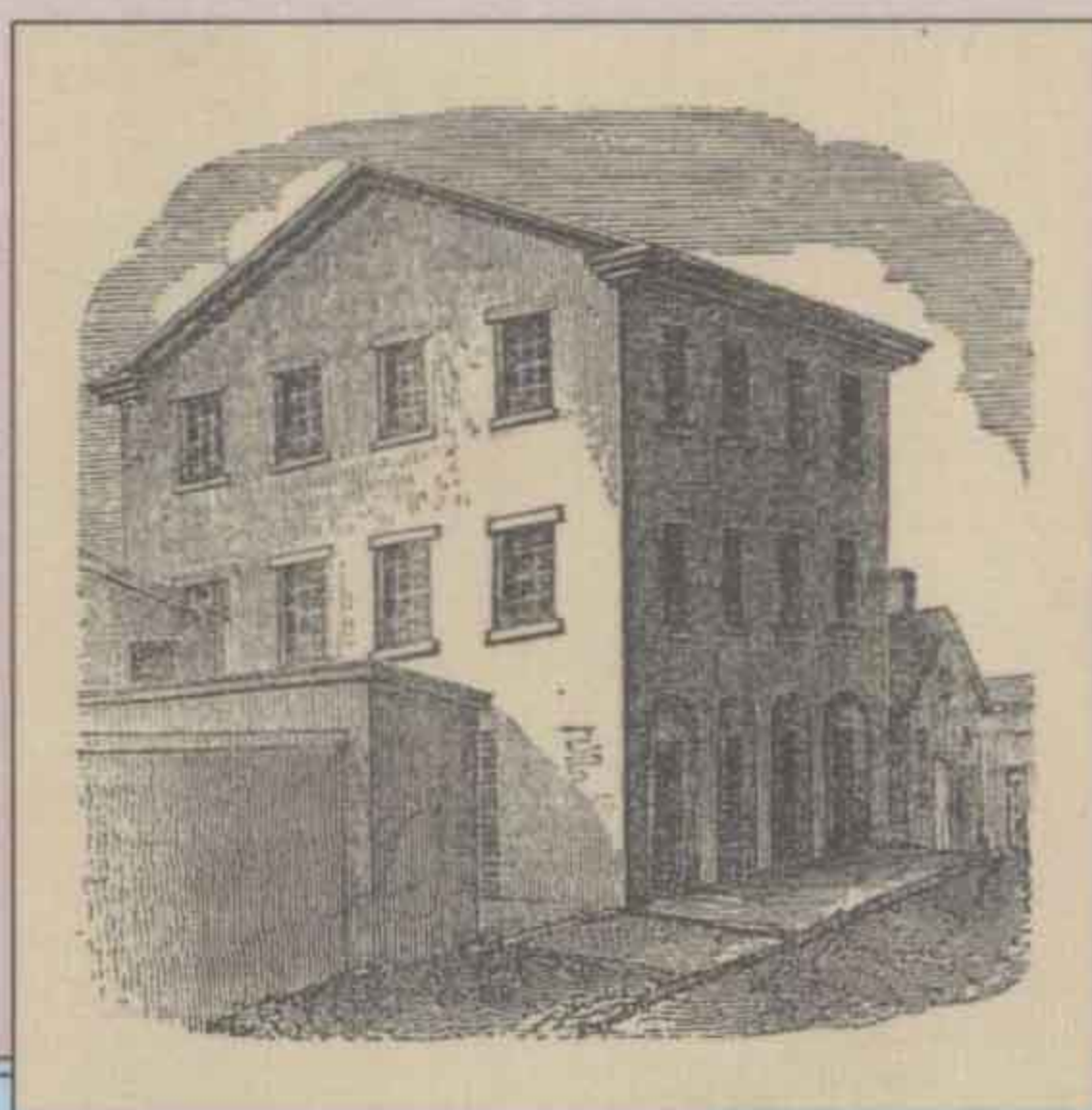


MEMOIR OF JAMES JACKSON

THE ATTENTIVE AND OBEDIENT SCHOLAR,
WHO DIED IN BOSTON,
OCTOBER 31, 1833,
AGED SIX YEARS AND ELEVEN MONTHS

BY HIS TEACHER,
MISS SUSAN PAUL



Edited by
LOIS BROWN

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For my parents—
my first and best teachers

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MEMOIR OF JAMES JACKSON

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Introduction

IN 1831 BOSTONIAN and pioneering feminist speaker Maria Stewart issued a call to her African American sisters: “Awake! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that you are endowed with noble and exalted faculties. O ye daughters of Africa!” she asked pointedly, “what have you done to immortalize your names beyond the grave?”¹

Four years later, twenty-six-year-old Susan Paul (1809–1841) answered that call by publishing the *Memoir of James Jackson, the attentive and obedient scholar, who died in Boston, October 31, 1833, aged six years and eleven months*. In doing so she became the author of the first African American biography, and the first American to write a work of evangelical juvenilia about a real rather than imagined African American child. The volume with unadorned pasteboard covers was priced at twenty-five cents and was soon displayed alongside works by Phillis Wheatley and Lydia Maria Child in the downtown Boston bookshop of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, located on Washington Street.

Paul’s chronicle of the life of James Jackson Jr. (1827–1833) was based chiefly on her daily experiences as his primary school instructor, Baptist Sunday school teacher, and family friend. Combining eyewitness accounts, personal testimony, and excerpts from traditional Sunday school texts, the *Memoir of James Jackson* is an impressive document of

social history rooted in nineteenth-century evangelicalism and the experiences of free African Americans.

Paul's turn to authorship was undoubtedly influenced by her family's pioneering work and political activism. Her father, Thomas, was pastor of the African Church, also known as the Belknap Street Church, a primary institution in Boston's African American community. Her uncles Nathaniel and Benjamin Paul, also Baptist ministers, were at the forefront of the antebellum struggle to abolish slavery and to establish stable, productive African American communities in the United States and Canada.² The *Memoir* appears to be a reflection of Susan Paul's political desire to advocate racial equality in the antebellum North. "There is, surely, sufficient in this little book," she wrote, "to convince all who are candid, that the moral and intellectual powers of colored children are inferior to the power of others, only as their advantages are inferior. Let, then, this little book do something towards breaking down that unholy prejudice which exists against color." In the preface to the *Memoir* Susan Paul declared herself an advocate of the African American community's most defenseless members: the "children of our brethren have too long been neglected. There is among them many a gem, and whose is the guilt that they are not brought out from among the rubbish and polished?"

Paul's *Memoir*, all but neglected until now, reshapes our understanding of African American literary traditions.³ It predates by twenty-one years Josephine Brown's *Biography of an American Bondman* (1856), the life story of her father,

William Wells Brown, previously hailed as the first biography by a black woman, and thus dramatically revises the timeline for African American biography. The *Memoir* also confirms the early and formative influence of women on the genre of African American biography. Paul's assertion of James Jackson's humanity and the exemplary nature of his life provides an invaluable lens through which to reconsider foundational African American texts such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life* (1845), the narrative of Sojourner Truth (1850), Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Although both Susan Paul and her subject were freeborn African Americans, in the *Memoir* she addresses primary issues found in early writings by former and fugitive slaves: slavery and freedom, segregation and assimilation, religious awakening and spirituality. Finally, Paul's discussions of African American elementary and Sabbath school education invite attention to education and childhood socialization, rarely studied aspects of nineteenth-century African American life.

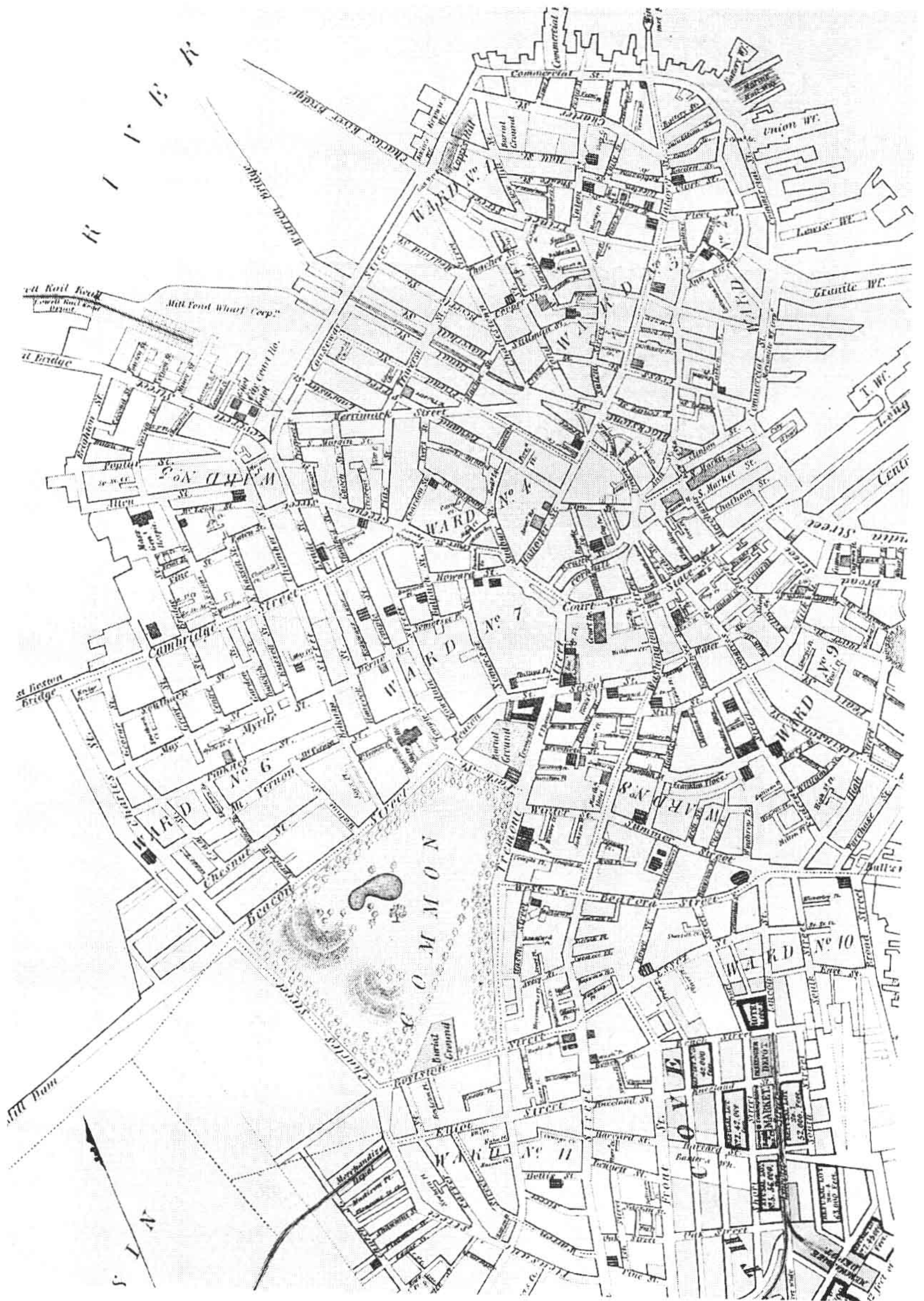
IN HER PREFACE to the *Memoir* Paul acknowledges the scarcity of early biographical details in her chronicle of James's intellectual and spiritual development: "The circumstances in which he was placed, the first four years of his life, rendered it impracticable . . . to present as many particulars as might be deemed desirable." Her comment implies a context of domestic upheaval and family difficulties. In Chapter I Paul tells us that James's "parents lived in Boston," that his father,

James Jackson, was “a respectable coloured man,” and that James Jr. was born on December 5, 1826. In 1826 the Jacksons lived on Butolph Street, in the heart of Boston’s African American neighborhood. The 1820 federal census of Massachusetts and Boston city directories for 1820–1823 and 1825–1826 show that during this period the family moved six times, but also that such constant domestic upheaval was not uncommon in the African American community. However, the Jacksons never moved far from the religious and social center of their community, namely, their church. Their residences on South Russell, Cambridge, Vine, and Butolph Streets situated the Jacksons squarely in African American Beacon Hill and close to the African Church and its school, on Belknap Street. In 1821 both the Jackson and Paul families lived on Cambridge Street, one of the principal streets in the black community.⁴

The 1820 census for Massachusetts is the only one containing a definitive entry for the Jackson family. There the Jacksons are identified as a family of “Free Colored Persons” living on South Russell Street in Boston’s sixth ward. James Jackson is the head of household; the family consists of a male and a female between the ages of twenty-six and forty-five, and three boys under the age of fourteen.⁵ Paul’s narrative suggests that James had at least two brothers and two sisters. Paul reports that “before James was two years old, his

Opposite:

Boston’s African American neighborhood, 1835



father was taken sick, and after suffering a great deal he died.” After the death of James Jackson Sr., probably in 1827 or 1828, his family disappeared from the public record, and their whereabouts during the next ten years are unknown.⁶

The identity of Mrs. Jackson remains an even greater mystery than the family’s actual size or later places of residence. Although Paul gives James’s mother a powerful role in the *Memoir*, she provides no identifying details such as name, age, or occupation, and the 1830 and 1840 census reports do not identify with certainty a Jackson widow. James’s mother may have been named Anna, Fanny, or Hannah; all emerge as possibilities from the city directories and the census.⁷

UNLIKE HER YOUNG STUDENT JAMES, Susan Paul belonged to a well-known and influential New England family whose pioneering work in the ministry and the abolitionist movement has been well documented.⁸ Susan was the second of three children born to the Reverend Thomas Paul (1773–1831), minister of the first black Baptist church in the North and Boston’s oldest African American church, and his wife, Catherine. By the time of Susan’s birth, in 1809, Thomas Paul had been involved in Boston’s black religious life for at least twenty years. His earliest recorded participation dates to 1789, when, at the age of sixteen, he performed as “an exhorter of scripture passages” at segregated religious meetings at Faneuil Hall.⁹ In 1806, newly ordained as a Baptist minister, Paul was appointed pastor of the African Church