

Extraordinary WOMAN

Zipporah Potter Atkins was way ahead of her time in achieving the American Dream

by Vivian R. Johnson

Associate professor emerita, Boston University

ZIPPORAH POTTER ATKINS realized the American Dream more than two and a half centuries before the term was coined: in 1670, she bought a house in Boston. The fact that Atkins was a free black woman in colonial Boston, where most people of color were enslaved and property owners for the most part were white males, makes her purchase extraordinary. Atkins is the first known recorded African American woman to own a house and land in the city.

For three decades, she made her home on Salem Street in the North End, Boston's oldest neighborhood. Today, in this vastly topographically and demographically changed section of the city, a granite monument marks the site of Atkins's home near the intersection of Surface Road and Salem Street on the Rose Kennedy Greenway and the Freedom Trail.

In the rigid structure of Puritan society, in which women were seen as inferior to men and people of color were consigned to the lowest ranks, being a woman of African descent meant that Atkins's place would always be in the bottom stratum. In

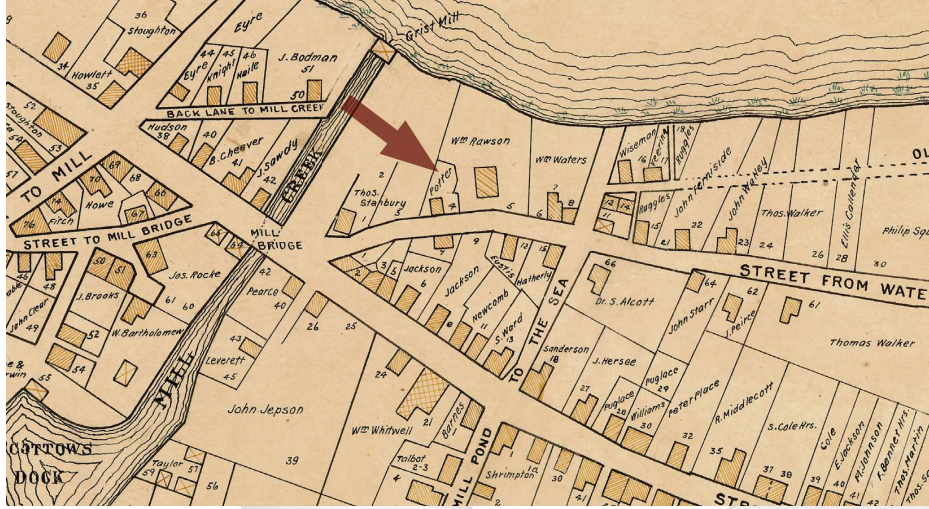
that context, her achievement of the American Dream was not just in acquiring property but in making a home where she could exercise her independence and affirm her connection to family and heritage.

Atkins's property, as documented in *Records and Land Titles Transcribed by Nathaniel Ingersoll Bowditch* (Bowditch Collection of Boston Conveyances, 1827-1859, Massachusetts Historical Society), was located "upon the narrow land leading from the northerly side of the mill bridge in Boston Town, towards Charlestown ferry." Her house and lot are depicted on the *Map of the Town of Boston 1676*, drawn c. 1920 by Samuel C. Clough, who used an array of primary source documents such as deeds, surveys, and Suffolk County Probate and Supreme Court records, to plot Boston's topographical history. This map shows parcel divisions identified with owners' names. Among Atkins's neighbors was Thomas Stanbury, who in 1680 built and owned The Old Feather Store in nearby Dock Square (it was demolished in 1860).

Atkins was a rare figure in colonial America because she was

born free, probably a few years after Massachusetts became the first colony to legalize the enslavement of black adults in 1641. Initially, children born of enslaved parents were legally free, but a law enacted in 1670 changed that, making it legal to sell the children of parents held in bondage. Despite the passage of subsequent Massachusetts laws drafted to proscribe the freedom of blacks, Atkins, born c. 1645, remained free her entire life.

Atkins's parents were enslaved by the wealthy Boston merchant Robert Keayne. In the will he drafted in August 1653, Keayne left forty shillings (roughly \$300 today) to the two male Africans he held as slaves, one of whom was Atkins's father, Richard Done. (Keayne also left twenty shillings to Done's wife, Grace.) The merchant stipulated that if Done died, his forty-shilling legacy would be given to his daughter, "Zipora." Done died on November 11, 1653; Keayne died on March 23, 1656. Seventeen years to the day of her father's death, Atkins bought her house and land. The purchase on the anniversary of his death may have been her way of honoring his memory.



LEFT The red arrow on this section of a map depicting Boston in 1676 shows the location of Zipporah Potter Atkins's property. **PAGE 3** A granite monument marks the site of the property.

Credits: Map, Samuel Chester Clough Research Materials Toward a Topographical History of Boston, Massachusetts, Massachusetts Historical Society. Monument photographed by Nicolas Hyacinthe. 3-D background renderings on pages 1-3 by Zachary Ingalls based on historical documentation of the region.

Atkins might have done domestic work for wages to supplement her inheritance and in order to purchase the property. She paid forty-six pounds “currant Mony of New England in hand,” as the deed states, for the house and land she purchased from Thomas Stevens, a baker, and his wife, Sarah. Forty-six colonial pounds in today’s currency ranges between \$9,000 and \$10,400. Atkins probably would have honored her mother, too, by purchasing her freedom and bringing her to live at the Salem Street home. Indeed, to help Atkins buy the property her mother, Grace Done, could have contributed her Keayne legacy, though records indicating either possibility have yet to be found.

Deed records show that there was no dwelling on the land when the Stevenses bought it in 1653. They built a house sometime during the seventeen-year period before selling the property to Atkins. It was a narrow lot, approximately 1,680 square feet, or as recorded in Atkins’s deed, “in breadth about Twenty Eight foot & Sixty foot in Length.” Given those dimensions, the dwelling, no doubt a timber-frame structure, was probably built according to a one-room plan with two levels and attic space. As depicted on the Clough map, the house is close to the street, which would have left room on the lot for outbuildings.

In researching the costs and sizes of seventeenth-century timber-frame houses, in Massachusetts, the late Abbott Lowell Cummings, former executive director for the Society of the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now Historic New England), found that between 1637 and 1706, thirty-nine of the seventy dwellings for which there are dimensions are of the typical one-room-plan house. Cummings noted in his 1979 book, *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625-1725*, that while the one-room plan “cannot be associated exclusively with persons of moderate means,” probate records tend to indicate that this basic design appealed to “persons of limited means and few material possessions.” Cummings also noted that

owners tended to enlarge these houses when personal circumstances permitted.

Cummings found that between 1630 and 1660, ten of thirteen estates listed in the probate records of Suffolk, Middlesex, and Essex counties—with likely one-room plans—ranged in value from fifteen to 153 pounds. Only four of twenty-seven estate inventories with two-room house plans were less than 100 pounds. The forty-six pounds Atkins paid for her house make it very likely in the one-room house plan category. The size of a one-room-plan house built on a narrow lot during this period can be visualized using Cummings’s report of a 1640 contract for the construction of a timber-frame house in the present Haymarket Square area with the following specifications: “16 foot long and 14 foot wyde. . . the Chimney framed without dawbing to be done with hewen timber.” A house of similar size would have fit well on Atkins’s parcel of land.

Atkins might also have made a home for her husband, Thomas. They were married in 1693 in a ceremony officiated by the renowned Puritan minister the Reverend Cotton Mather. Whether Thomas was free or enslaved is not known; however, although Puritans promoted marriage among those they enslaved, they did not encourage couples to live as families.

Just six years after marrying, Atkins sold her property. This 1699 deed of sale bears her initials made in her own hand, not the mark she made earlier. This document indicates that Atkins had attained a level of literacy, another landmark achievement for a woman of African descent in colonial America. What became of Atkins after she sold her home is not known. She apparently remained a resident of Boston until her death. According to sexton’s records, Atkins was laid to rest on March 18, 1705, in Copp’s Hill Burying Ground in the North End. The exact location of her grave is unknown. 🗿

Etched in Stone

by Dorothy Clark, Editor

Professor Vivian Johnson says she fully intends to return to the research project she abruptly dropped about seven years ago because she learned of Zipporah Potter Atkins, but she doesn't know when.

"I had to write about this woman because she asserted herself in a manner that couldn't be ignored," Johnson said.

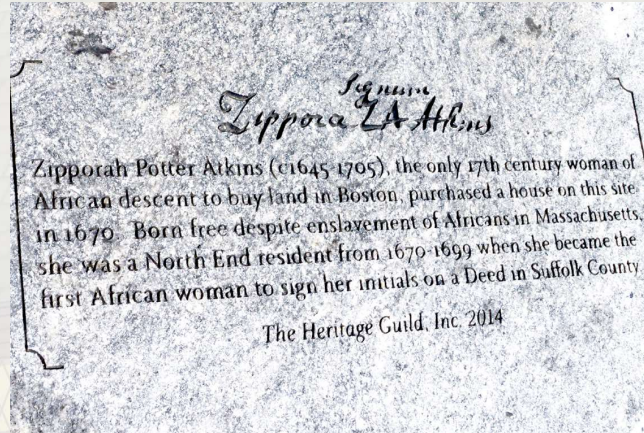
Johnson had been researching how African Americans educated their children before 1800 when she came across a 1708 probate document stating the disposition of the estate of a Boston physician, which included "the dwelling house with land, yard and garden . . . purchased of Zippora [sic] a free negro woman." A stunning discovery, the document establishes that the prior property owner was a black woman. "Sitting with the deed book in my hands, I was so excited. I had to put it down and go outside to get myself together," Johnson said.

A woman buying property in Puritan Boston without the empowerment of a male is extraordinary, said Johnson, adding, "The fact that she was black takes it to another level." Johnson set out to learn how an African-descended woman in colonial New England accomplished this. "It was a six-year, lonely journey of untangling the series of mysteries," Johnson said, that included sorting and verifying the various spellings of Atkins's names (sometimes within the same document) as well as her use of six surnames over the course of

her life. She acquired at least two of her surnames, Potter and Atkins, by marriage. This confused the record of Atkins's presence and she in effect "disappeared" at times because of her surname changes. But Johnson believes that was not Atkins's intent. Rather, by using different names,

Atkins showed a masterful ability to negotiate some of the race and gender barriers erected by colonial society.

Johnson said she wanted to ensure that Atkins never again fell into obscurity. She enlisted The Heritage Guild Inc. (an organization established in 1975 by fifteen African American women to recognize the presence of blacks in Boston since 1639, of which Johnson is a member) to work with the Museum of African American History and the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, both in Boston, to commission a marker honoring Atkins. Etched with the initials she used to sign the 1699 deed for the sale of her property, the granite monument makes



Atkins's presence a permanent one in Boston's North End. "The fact that she wrote on that deed says who she was and what she thought about herself," Johnson said. The monument was dedicated by Governor Deval Patrick in a ceremony in May 2014 that also honored the Heritage Guild Inc.

Johnson describes her discovery of Atkins as "an incredibly illuminating personal experience, profound. It was amazing. Absolutely amazing." Balanced with her other research projects, which include her own genealogy, Johnson is continuing her research on Atkins's life. "Zipporah Potter Atkins continues to amaze and inspire me," she said.

Zipporah Potter Atkins showed a masterful ability to negotiate some of the race and gender barriers erected by colonial society.