The Abiel Smith School was one of the first schools in the West End and one of the first public schools for African Americans in the country. In 1787 Prince Hall, a founder of the Black Mason’s Lodge, unsuccessfully petitioned the legislature for equal access to public schools in Massachusetts. A decade later, Hall’s son Primus opened a school in his home for the education of African American boys and girls (1798).

Primus Hall’s school inspired many to pursue equality of education, and offered opportunities for employment and economic growth to the children it taught that may not have been possible otherwise. Hall’s first generation of students were able to educate their own children in turn.

Known as the African School, it started with 20 students but grew to 60 with funding from the community. A schoolhouse was constructed in the basement of the African Meeting House in 1808. Four years later, the town began to contribute funds to the school. About twenty years later, the Abiel Smith School was built.

Abiel Smith was a white philanthropist who bequeathed $4,000 to the city for the education of African American children. His legacy funded the construction of a school building. Built by the famous gothic revival architect Richard Upjohn in 1834 and renamed the Abiel Smith School, it opened on Belknap Street (now Joy St.) at the corner of Smith Court in 1835 with 180 students.

By 1830, two thirds of Boston’s African American population lived in the West End and by 1835, all African American children in Boston were assigned to the Abiel Smith School. The school went through a difficult period as parents noticed the Boston School Committee was not doing its due diligence in school maintenance or teacher quality. Worse still, the school became known for employing white teachers said to be racist, along with a headmaster who used excessive corporal punishment on students. It became clear that the school, intending to be separate but equal, had failed. It was closed in 1855 when Boston Public Schools were desegregated by legislative mandate.