

Johnson House selected for bench project

By **Jennette Barnes**

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NEW BEDFORD — The New Bedford Historical Society has been selected by the Toni Morrison Society to participate in the Bench by the Road Project, which places benches to recognize sites and people important to the history of the African diaspora.

Lee Blake, president of the Historical Society, said the news was highly anticipated and exciting.

“The bench project is reclaiming the history of African-Americans, who really have been kind of left out of the historical record,” she said in an interview.

The Historical Society’s Nathan and Polly Johnson House will become the 25th site worldwide to earn the designation from the international literary society of Morrison scholars and supporters.

The Johnson House will receive a memorial bench and plaque on Sept. 17, honoring its place in history as the first free home of Frederick Douglass and a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Blake said the bench could help attract tourists who visit the Morrison bench sites, too. At least two others are located in Massachusetts, in Concord and Lincoln.

Morrison, 87, is a Nobel laureate in literature and the author of acclaimed novels that shed light on the African-American experience, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Beloved.” She has attended many of the dedication ceremonies for the benches since the project began more than a decade ago.

The name “Bench by the Road” comes from her description, in a 1989 interview, of the absence of historical markers commemorating the lives of enslaved Africans.

“There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves . . . There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300-foot tower, there’s no small bench by the road. . . . And because such a place doesn’t exist . . . the book had to,” she said in *World* magazine in an interview about “Beloved.”

Previous benches have been placed at numerous U.S. sites, in Paris and in Fort-de-France, Martinique.



Lee Blake, President of the New Bedford Historical Society, opens the blinds of the Nathan and Polly House on Seventh Street in New Bedford where Frederick Douglass (national leader of the abolitionist movement) lived during his time in New Bedford (1838-1845). On a wall, a drawing of another famous New Bedford resident, Sgt. William Harvey Carney who was the first African American to receive the Medal of Honor for his gallantry during the Civil War. [PETER PEREIRA/THE STANDARD-TIMES FILE/SCMG]

Morrison Society “Bench by the Road” sites

The first sites were:

2008 - Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina
 2009 - Oberlin, Ohio
 2009 - Hattiesburg, Mississippi
 2010 - the 20th Arrondissement in Paris, France
 2011 - Concord, Massachusetts
 2011 - Washington, D.C.
 2012 - Atlanta, Georgia
 2013 - Mitchelville, South Carolina
 2013 - Walden Woods, Lincoln, Massachusetts
 2013 - Fort-de-France, Martinique
 2014 - Collingdale, Pennsylvania
 2015 - Jackson, Mississippi
 2015 - Middletown, Delaware
 2015 - Nyack, New York
 2015 - Lincoln University, Pa.
 2016 - Baton Rouge, Louisiana
 2016, Atlanta, Georgia
 2016 - Cleveland, Ohio
 2016 - Harlem, New York City
Source: Toni Morrison Society.

Blake said the bench will be situated in the backyard of the Johnson House, in a spot where someone seated on the bench can look up and see all three of the properties owned by the Johnsons near the corner of Spring and Seventh Streets. The home is across the street from the future Abolition Row Park.

An accompanying plaque near the bench will recognize the Johnson

House as an Underground Railroad landmark owned by black abolitionists who offered refuge for at least seven freedom seekers, including Frederick and Anna Douglass, the Molyneux-Gibson family, and the family of William H. Brown, abolitionist and the first African-American novelist, according to a news release from the Historical Society.

Blake said the group is in the process of selecting a quotation from Douglass to include on the plaque.

The bench will be six feet long, made of black steel. The Historical Society applied to the Morrison Society for acceptance into the program and has already raised the \$5,000 necessary to acquire the bench, Blake said.

She said it is fitting to add the bench during 2018, the bicentennial anniversary of Frederick Douglass’ birth. The ceremony will also celebrate Frederick Douglass Day, the first city-recognized anniversary of the orator’s arrival in New Bedford, slated for Sept. 17, 2018.

Morrison Society board members often attend the ceremony, which will be open to the public. Notable board members include renowned scholars Carolyn Denard, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Johnetta Cole.

In addition, all Morrison Society members who live in Massachusetts will be invited, and Douglass descendant Kenneth Morris has indicated he will attend, Blake said.