

**Meeting Date:** December 16, 2025

**Attendance:**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Akiba, Sukia     | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Greenidge, George |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bastola, Kashish | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lubintus,         |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bhembe, Xenia    | Gassendina  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brown, Thabiti   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mason, Natassa    |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Collins, Melissa | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Paris, Paula      |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dance, Kwame     | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Wyzard Jones,     |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Davis, Jeff      | Cheyenne  |

**City AFC Staff**

- Brown, Deidre
- Milkey, Diana

*\* Arrived after the meeting  
was called to order*

**Online Participants:** Cheyenne Wyzard-Jones, Kashish Bastola, Sukia Akiba

Action Items will be highlighted in yellow

**Call to Order:**

Chair George Greenidge called this meeting of the American Freedman Commission to order at 6:32 PM.

**Agenda and Minutes:**

**I. Public Comment: 15-minute public comment period**

- a. Doreen Wade – Question on obtaining minutes
  - i. After requesting to speak before the Commission, Doreen feels as though she was being intentionally misled because she was given the wrong date and time for the Zoom webinar that changed an hour ahead of the meeting. She wanted to make it very clear that it is unacceptable and that she feels she is “being silenced” and “denied transparency.” She urges the commission to look into this matter and to reconsider how things are being run.
- b. William Belt -
  - i. William Belt, formerly employed with the City, came on to say that it was an honor to be able to work with the American Freedman Commission and that he still believes in the work that the Commission is doing. The Commission unanimously thanked Will for the work he did for the City and the

Commission.

- c. Public Comment closed at 6:45 PM

## **II. Review and Approval of 11/18/25 Meeting Minutes**

- a. Chair Greenidge notes that, in the future, he would like notes to reflect the reception and specificity of the public comment
- b. Commissioner Cheyenne Wyzard-Jones has noted that her name is being misspelled and corrected the spelling.
- c. Chair Greenidge notes that minutes should take note of who comes to the meeting late.
- d. Commissioner Xenia Bhembe says that the names of the nominations for Vice Chair were not written in the notes.
- e. Chair Greenidge moved to close review and approval of the minutes.

## **III. Old Business**

### **a. Election of Commission Vice Chairperson**

- i. Brought up at last meeting (November). The Commission voted to replace the co-chair with a Vice Chair.
- ii. Duties:
  - 1. Take over all responsibilities of the Chair when the Chair is not available
- iii. Nominations
  - 1. Commissioner Melissa Jackson Collins
  - 2. Commissioner Cheyenne Wyzard-Jones
  - 3. Commissioner Kwame Dance (declined)
  - 4. Commissioner Sukia Akiba
  - 5. Commissioner Thabiti Brown (declined)
- iv. Each nominated commissioner speaks on their own behalf as to why they should be elected Vice Chair.
- v. Discussion and questions are opened.
  - 1. How are you thinking about organization for maximum impact and efficiency?
    - a. Commissioner Jackson-Collins – Working from the framework provided for the commission and working with the strengths of each commissioner. Ensuring that we care for the community we serve.

- b. Commissioner Wyzard-Jones – Working groups will be able to split up tasks and create efficiency with spokespeople. Engaging with community leaders and with working groups outside of monthly meetings. Continue to work through the purpose of the Ordinance.
    - c. Commissioner Akiba – Very clear priorities and timelines. Accountability and prioritizing community. Impact is structure and staying on task.
  2. Does the Vice Chair need to be present in-person if the Chair is not present?
    - a. No. They are able to join remotely. Remote laws are in place unchanged until 2027.
  3. Question for Chair: What balance of skills and experience would be helpful to augment the Chair’s leadership?
    - a. Commissioner Jeff Davis asks if this is a partnership as a leader. Chair Greenidge says that a partnership is not how the position is written in the bylaws and that the position is meant only to take over for the Chair when the Chair is absent.
  4. Commissioner Wyzard-Jones would like to know how the Vice Chair would work with the Chair and wants to know what requirements are necessary for the Vice Chair position.
    - a. Chair Greenidge says there is no real description of duties besides taking over the Chair position when the Chair is absent, and that there is no need for specific qualities.
  5. Commissioner Davis asks again if the Chair has any specific weaknesses that he would like to supplement with the Vice Chair role.
    - a. Chair Greenidge reiterates that the Vice Chair position is not a partnership and expresses his belief that his own role is the one that is going to

- be facilitating the most movement.
- b. Commissioner Paula Paris comments about the role of the Vice Chair as being “purely administrative” and that if there is a group of sub-committees and committee Chairs, there should be an Executive Committee.
6. Commissioner Jackson-Collins has removed her name from the running, opting instead to support Commissioner Cheyenne Wyzard-Jones.
  7. Commissioner Akiba has removed her name from the running, opting instead to support Commissioner Wyzard-Jones.
  8. Commissioner Wyzard-Jones would like to go on the record to say that she is ready to take on the position from an administrative standpoint and asks for transparent and open communication.
- vi. Commissioner Cheyenne Wyzard-Jones is voted in as Vice Chair unanimously and uncontested.

**b. Review of the American Freedmen Commission and Core Objectives**

- i. Reference: Description of American Freedmen Commission and Core Objectives Handout (Copy of handout attached to minutes)
- ii. Read out loud by Chief of Equity and Inclusion Deidre Travis Brown
- iii. Point of Information: Chair Greenidge asks if there was an extra point that involved working on projects as needed alongside the City Manager. Deidre confirms and clarifies that, as she reports directly to the City Manager, it would be through her.
- iv. Vice Chair Wyzard-Jones asks to discuss the sixth point in this or the next meeting to inform how to move forward with sub-committees and the direction of the work. This will be added under “New Business” in this agenda.
- v. Commissioner Kashish Bastola makes a note that they would like to clarify the language around the sixth point in the

upcoming discussion.

vi. Chair Greenidge closes out this discussion.

**c. Discussion: Who is under the umbrella of American Freedmen?**

i. Official language from the Ordinance: “ ‘American Freedmen’ shall mean: persons who were freed from Chattel Slavery in the United States between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.”

ii. Commissioner Jackson-Collins asks how we can consider anything past the end of slavery to be a qualifier for American Freedmen.

iii. Chief of Equity and Inclusion Brown reads a comment by Saskia VannJames (in attendance online in the meeting), the writer of the Ordinance, stating that this definition is the legal and specific definition as it concerns the City of Cambridge AFC.

iv. Chair Greenidge refers to an emailed document that he sent that has a more specific definition.

v. Vice Chair Wyzard-Jones would like to highlight a public comment asking how many people currently serving on the Commission are considered “American Freedmen” based on the legal definition. This question is tabled and will be brought up under “New Business.”

**d. Commission Members Bios/Photos**

i. Chair Greenidge asks the commission where they stand with their website biographies, where they are, and for a concrete deadline by which to send them to Deidre.

1. Commissioner Xenia Bhembe: Will edit and send it in by tomorrow
2. Commissioner Kwame Dance: Sent into Will
3. Commissioner Thabiti Brown: Needs to edit and will send into Chief Brown tomorrow
4. Commissioner Jeff Davis: No edits
5. Commissioner Natassa Mason: No edits
6. Commissioner Melissa Jackson-Collins: Will have it sent in by Friday
7. Commissioner Gassendina Lubintus: No edits
8. Commissioner Paula Paris: No edits, but states opinion

that commissioners should make clear in the bios if the commissioner identifies as American Freedmen

9. Commissioner Cheyenne Wyzard-Jones: Shared changes, no more edits
10. Commissioner Kashish Bastola: Needs to edit and clarify, will have it sent by tomorrow
11. Commissioner Sukia Akiba: Will edit and send it by tomorrow

- ii. Photos – either taken this evening or sending them in the future. Commissioner PP opts not to have a photo.

#### **IV. New Business**

##### **a. City Chief of Equity & Inclusion Update & Department Restructuring**

- i. Chief of Equity and Inclusion Brown addresses the recent Department of Equity and Inclusion restructuring. She provided a brief history of the past three years and the Department's inception.
- ii. Within the last year, the City Council had asked for the consolidation of roles and budgets. The HR and Strategy Departments helped identify the structure and roles needed to increase productivity and impact in the community.
- iii. Much of the information is personnel-related and cannot be shared specifically.
- iv. In response to recent news articles, Chief Brown clarifies that there is no rollback to DEI initiatives across the City, nor are there cuts to any specific Commissions.
- v. The Department will be hiring Program Managers to support the work for the Executive Directors, who will support multiple Commissions.
- vi. Commissioner Brown asks how this will impact the work of commissioners, given the current political and anti-ADEI sentiment.
  1. Chief Brown notes that the City is not “dialing back” on anything related to Equity and Inclusion, and states that if anything, it is trying to do more.

- vii. Commissioner Davis asks what commissioners can do to help with the public reception.
  - 1. Commissioner Brown says that carrying the sentiment that the mission and vision are not compromised and reinforcing it as much as possible is important.
  - 2. Commissioner Natassa Mason notes that the community has been speaking about a lack of trust in the City government, especially people of color who were already feeling excluded from civic engagement before these cuts.
- viii. Vice Chair Wyzard-Jones asks if there will be a Program Manager for the AFC?
  - 1. Chair Brown says yes, there will be.
  - 2. Vice Chair Wyzard-Jones notes that, when the AFC works on their Harm Report to name the injustices done to American Freedmen institutionally within the City, this restructuring should not be exempt from audit.
- ix. What is the current budget?
  - 1. Currently \$300,000 is in the budget that the ED will be responsible for managing. This does not include the ED's salary.
  - 2. Chief Brown confirmed that the FY26 Budget for the American Freedmen Commission is \$300,000. This does not include the Executive Director's salary.

**b. Roles and Responsibilities of City Staff and Commissioners**

- i. In a printed handout, the duties of staff, commissioners, the executive director, and other roles are outlined. **This will be posted alongside the meeting minutes.**

**c. Guidance on Open Meeting Law and Commission Working Groups**

- i. In a printed handout, the Open Meeting Law is outlined by the Cambridge City Solicitor. **This will be posted alongside the meeting minutes.**
- ii. Commissioner Paris notes that all Commissioners need to receive training in Open Meeting Law. Chief Brown recommends that everyone take this training.

- iii. Chief Brown emphasizes that everyone has a voice as a commissioner and that everyone's role is equal, including the Chair and Vice Chair roles.
- iv. Question and Answer
  - 1. Commissioner Paula Paris asks by whom and where the information for the Commission is posted. Chief Brown states that she now has the authority to do so and will post it on the City Calendar. Content for the website will be posted by City IT Staff.

**d. AFC- Commissioner Attestation Statement**

- i. The Ordinance states that 85% of the Commission must be made up of people who self-identify as American Freedmen.
- ii. Commissioner Greenidge submitted a request that the City Solicitor and the City Clerk notarize a statement he had drafted. Chief Brown presented the request and accompanying statement to the City Solicitor, who declined to certify the attestation without additional verification.
- iii. Commissioner Paris expresses concern that there is no consistent process by which self-identification can be certified.
- iv. Chair Greenidge insists that because the commission Ordinance specifies self-identification, it does not need to be verified.
- v. Vice Chair Commissioner WJ notes that legally, someone is an American Freedman if their ancestors are in the post-slavery census documents.
- vi. Commissioner Jackson-Collins expresses concern that self-identification should be supplemented with documentation.
- vii. Chair Greenidge again insists that the language of the Ordinance states there is no need for documentation and only self-identification, and asks to move on.
- viii. Vice Chair Wyzard-Jones objects to say that there is a legal precedent outside of the Ordinance that denotes an American Freedman and that ignoring this would be avoiding accountability.
- ix. Commissioner Bastola speaks in favor of tabling the decision for now, stating that it's important that race and American

Freedmen status are kept discrete and that conflating the two of them would limit the legitimacy of the Commission's work.

- x. Chair Greenidge asks if the Committee wants to table the discussion or identify who self-identifies as an American Freedman now.
  - 1. The discussion about legally notarizing American Freedman status is temporarily tabled unanimously.
  - 2. The Commissioners (72%) who self-identify as American Freedman (without documentation) are as follows.
    - a. George Greenidge
    - b. Kwame Dance
    - c. Xenia Bhembe
    - d. Paula Paris
    - e. Melissa Jackson-Collins
    - f. Natassa Mason
    - g. Jeffery Thomas Davis Jr.
    - h. Cheyenne Wyzard-Jones

**e. AFC-Working Groups and purpose/goal Confirmation of Meeting Schedule 2026**

- i. Confirmed for 2026:
  - 1. January 6<sup>th</sup> – Working Session
  - 2. January 20<sup>th</sup> – Cambridge Community Center starting at 5:30
- ii. Commissioner Jackson-Collins suggests having a public-facing meeting later so the commission can formulate cohesive answers to questions.
- iii. Commissioner Paris suggests that in January, the commission should focus on bringing members of the public into the meeting process and to examine the harm being done institutionally to focus the efforts of the AFC toward what is dictated in the Ordinance.
- iv. The meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> stands. The calendar will be updated to reflect this.

**V. The following items are tabled until next session:**

**a. Discussion: Ordinance Rule Regarding Work with City Manager**

- b. Discussion: Documentation as American Freedmen**
- c. Kashish & Harvard**
- d. Next Meeting Agenda Recommendations**

Contact: [AFC@CambridgeMA.gov](mailto:AFC@CambridgeMA.gov)

***Meeting Adjourned***

Chair Greenidge deemed this meeting of the American Freedman Commission adjourned at 9:04 PM.