

THE

# GRIOT



Preserving  
African American  
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

Volume 1, Issue 1  
February 1998

## From the Editor's Desk

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *The Griot*, the newsletter of the African American Archives of Maine at the University of Southern Maine. The African American Archives of Maine were created on the foundation of a generous donation of papers,



Gerald E. Talbot

books, photographs, and artifacts from Gerald E. Talbot.

Talbot was Maine's first African American state legislator and a prominent civil rights leader, whose roots spread out from Maine into Massachusetts and New Brunswick, Canada, and whose

activities have benefitted residents of Maine for years. It is the goal of the African American Archives of Maine to become a critically important and accessible collection of African American historical material relating primarily to Maine and northern New England.

In traditional West and Central African cultures, the griot was a critical member of society. Trained for years in the history of a

royal family, the clan, or the larger culture, the griot narrated the accounts of the evolution of his people, including important births, deaths, marriages, and conquests. He was a living repository of historical knowledge through which generations of people could know their collective past. Fittingly, I have chosen this as the official name of this newsletter, for it exemplifies what the Archives can mean to its community and what it hopes to achieve as an historical and cultural collection.

In the coming months, the community will see the continued evolution of *The Griot* and the African American Archives of Maine. In each edition, the feature "A Place in Time" will highlight a selected piece from the archives. The newsletter will also feature editorials from people reflecting on the Archives and the African American legacy in Maine, and the calendar will announce upcoming events that pertain to interests in African American history and culture.

Maureen Elgersman  
assistant professor of history and  
faculty scholar for the African American  
Archives of Maine

## "A Place in Time"—A Letter Written by Booker T. Wash- ington

A recent perusal of a 1901 edition of Booker T. Washington's classic autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, located in the African American Archives of Maine, revealed the presence of an historical gem. Attached to the inside cover is a letter from the author himself, Booker T. Washington. Dated July 14, 1915, and addressed to the Ideal Desk Extension Company in Auburn, Maine, Washington's letter appealed to the company to make a donation for what would be in today's terms a minor piece of office furniture—a small filing cabinet. Part of the letter reads:

We have nearly sixteen hundred students enrolled during the school term.

They pay their own board and other personal labor, but they are unable to pay for the cost of equipment and teaching.

Any help which you can give us in this direction, we shall be glad to receive.

The letter, typed on the stationery of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, and signed in blue ink in the name Booker T. Washington, appears to be an original. The stationery also reveals that Tuskegee's Board of Trustees also stretched into New England, since one of the trustees was Alexander Mann, of Trinity Church in Boston.

Born into slavery in Virginia, Washington worked his way to Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia, where his commitment to getting an education (despite his poverty) and his obviously strong work ethic caught the attention of General Samuel Armstrong. Armstrong would go on to become one of Washington's strongest supporters and mentors. As an adult, Washington would help found Tuskegee Institute, which was based on "education of the hand, head, and heart." This

philosophy valued industrial training, a practical education, and moral instruction. In 1895, Washington addressed an audience at the Atlanta Exposition, offering social separation and economic cooperation between Blacks and Whites as a solution to racial unrest. By 1900, Washington was, arguably, the most powerful African American in the country—he was able to capture the support of the Black working class and to garner the philanthropy of many of the country's wealthy and elite.

Nonetheless, the manner in which Washington's letter was received, and whether the appeal to this local company was successful is unclear. What is clear is that this would have been one of Washington's last such solicitations on behalf of the African American students at Tuskegee; Booker T. Washington died on November 14, 1915.

It truly is a small world.

## Dear Readers

I am pleased to offer my greetings on the occasion of the publication of the initial issue of *The Griot*, and to report my enthusiasm for the African American Archives of Maine and the program this newsletter inaugurates.

This exceptional archive on the African American experience in Maine is an important component of the University of Southern Maine's new Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine, which the Library is honored to house. As many know, plans are now being developed for the construction of

the Sampson Center in the further renovation of the Albert Brenner Glickman Family Library on the Portland campus. The Archives, along with the Center's other archives, will seek to promote education and research in Maine's and the region's remarkably diverse history and to broaden our understanding of both the singularities and the commonalities of this experience. As Professor Elgersman, the Archives' faculty scholar, suggests, our intention is to build an educational program which will effectively link the collection's resources to academic programs here at the University, as well as to the educational experience in schools and organizations across the state, and to research interests throughout the country.

We intend to cooperate with other important collections in Maine which document African American history, both by understanding and promoting each other's collections. In this age of effective computer access to information, building a rich web of knowledge about the African American experience is readily achievable and should be the goal of us all. The Archives will add immensely to that body of knowledge, particularly with its strength in the 20th century.

The letter from Booker T. Washington which Professor Elgersman describes in this issue is a wonderful find, and hints at the larger potential value of the

Archives. Bringing to light any correspondence from a person of such historical prominence enriches the world's general knowledge about that person and his activities and concerns. Further, that correspondence illuminates a local connection between Mr. Washington and African Americans in this region and suggests lines of inquiry that would explore the region's response to Washington's efforts in Tuskegee which were of such national importance.

I look forward with great excitement to the development of the Archives.

Stephen C. Bloom  
director of the University of  
Southern Maine Library

## Calendar

Exhibition: "What Shall I Tell My Children?": Selected Pieces From the African American Archives of Maine." February 1 to March 15, 1998. The exhibition challenges viewers to reconcile questions—both positive and negative—about African American History in Maine. Viewers of the exhibit may be surprised by what they did not know about this history, but will be confronted with the question of whether one can be selective in what is told and what remains silent. The exhibition is located on the main floor of the Glickman Family Library on the Portland campus of the University of Southern Maine. For library hours, call (207) 780-4507.

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Portland, ME 04101  
Permit #370



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African American Archives  
of Maine  
University of Southern Maine  
P.O. Box 9301  
Portland, ME 04104-9301