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Black Leadership

Maureen Elgersman - Lee (ed.)
University of Southern Maine

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THE GRIOT



Preserving
African American
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

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From the Editor's Desk

It is an election year, and Americans across the country will go to the polls in November to make critical decisions about the configuration of this nation's leadership for the next four years. Prevalent election campaign themes focus on education, social security, health care, and the environment. The theme of the *Griot* for the 2000-2001 academic year will be "Black Leadership," and it will critically examine the political, social, and institutional

leadership of African Americans in Maine. This issue focuses on Gerald E. Talbot's three terms as the first Black elected to the Maine Legislature, and announces the African American Archives' fall exhibit, "Black Leadership: Changing the Maine Landscape." Subsequent issues will profile other men and women and their leadership legacies.

Maureen Elgersman Lee is assistant professor of history and faculty scholar for the African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library



Maureen Elgersman Lee

Gerald E. Talbot: Leadership as Process and Product

Having been at the forefront of the Portland chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1964, Gerald Talbot ran for Portland city council in 1971. He lost. In 1972, upon the recommendation of friends and family, Talbot set his sights higher and ran for a seat (Democrat) in the Maine Legislature. He won. When asked in a recent interview why he ran, Talbot noted that he had not expected to win, but saw the election process as a means of getting his voice heard. Once in Augusta, Talbot was faced with choosing between taking the popular road to re-election or getting as much done as possible while in office; he chose the latter. Fortunately, the two elements were not incompatible, and Talbot was re-elected to the legislature—twice. Three terms and six years after running a race he did not really believe he would win, Talbot finished his service in the Legislature and left his indelible imprint on leadership as both process and product.¹

Representing a district that included Blacks, Whites, and "low income people," Talbot saw himself as the candidate who gave the average voters "a choice as to whom they want to represent them on the very issues that affect their very lives."² Many of the concerns Talbot raised and the bills he introduced were designed to counter the marginalizing effects of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. Most victories were hard fought and long in coming, while some defeats opened the door for others to take up the tasks and carry them to fruition.

Combatting the effects and the very presence of racism in Maine is, perhaps, the area most representative of Talbot's "process-and-product" leadership. One of the most tangible manifestations of this was his fight to have derogatory, racist place names removed from the state map and from the larger mapping system. The *Portland Press Herald* described Talbot's efforts quite succinctly:

Virtually ever since he has been a member of the Maine House of

Representatives, Gerald Talbot, Portland, has been trying to have offensive words such as "nigger" removed from place names in this state.

He hasn't had much luck, ...

It was argued that historically significant places might have their names changed and there was some question as to what just might constitute an "offensive" name.

There is no question, however, that the term "nigger" is offensive. If it has any historical significance in any name, surely a suitable substitute can be found.³

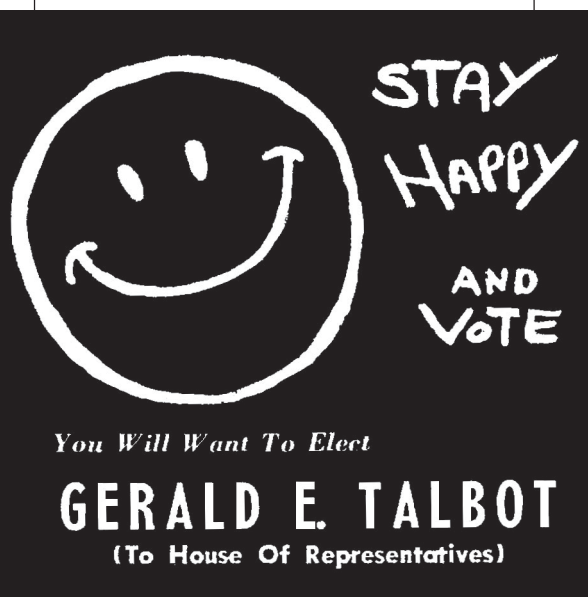
Talbot's bill was amended and adopted; it remains a public law in Maine. And while they were not proposed bills,

color. In 1974 Talbot moved for the passage of an order recognizing the domestics, custodial staff, and others who performed the daily maintenance of the Legislature. Talbot stated before the House:

I think they deserve our thanks. It is one of those jobs that really goes thankless, and it is time that we didn't look upon these people, the janitorial services and custodial services, as people that don't deserve thanks. So let's give them our thanks by passing this order.⁵

In 1976, Portland colleague Laurence Connolly presented (and Talbot co-sponsored) a resolution supporting striking workers at a Maine paper plant, and although it was indefinitely postponed, Talbot called on all unions in Maine to support the 350 striking workers and their families. The following year, Connolly presented (and Talbot cosponsored) a bill to increase the state's minimum wage to three dollars per hour.⁶

Heterosexism was also an issue that garnered Gerald Talbot's attention while a state legislator. Legislative Document 1419, "An Act to Include the Term 'Sexual or Affectional Preference' in the Maine Human Rights Act, was one of the most controversial proposals of Talbot's term, often polarizing legislators and their constituents on the idea of extending legal protections to gays and lesbians. Citing that "sexual preference should not interfere with a person's basic rights," Talbot proposed securing protection in employment, housing, public accommodation, and extension of credit. He further commented that "any doctrine of superiority based on this differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust, and dangerous." The bill was indefinitely postponed and died between houses during the 108th term of the Legislature, but in a manner almost ahead of his time, Talbot brought to light an issue that would return to the state's political and social debates for years.⁷



Gerald E. Talbot Collection, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine Glickman Family Library (abridged).

Talbot also helped raise a public consciousness through a number of joint resolutions that recognized the observation of Black History Week (now Black History Month), and the work of various African Americans, including artist/scholar David Driskell.⁴

A heightened concern for the working class led Talbot to cosponsor various bills and, again, to sponsor resolutions and sentiments recognizing Mainers' struggles to earn a living wage, irrespective of skin

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

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Gerald E. Talbot: Leadership as Process and Product

Continued from the front

After his tenure as a Maine legislator, Gerald Talbot was nominated by Gov. Joseph Brennan to Maine's State Board of Education in 1980. The next year, he was appointed to the Governmental Affairs Committee of the National Association of State Boards of Education.

In 1980 Gerald Talbot received the Jefferson Award for the "greatest public service by an elected or appointed official."⁸ Now retired, he remains active in the life of the Portland community.

Notes

¹Gerald E. Talbot, interview by author, 4 May 2000, Portland, Maine; "Talbot to Enter Primary to Seek Seat in House," *Portland Evening Express*, 1 May 1972; Pat Sherlock, "Maine's First Black Lawmaker," *Portland Press Herald*, 13 December 1972.

²Sherlock, "Maine's First Black Lawmaker," *Portland Press Herald*; "Talbot to Enter Primary," *Portland Evening Press*.

³"Offensive Names," *Portland Press Herald*, 20 May 1977.

⁴Maine, *Legislative Documents and Papers of the 108th Legislature, 5 January 1977 to 25 July 1977, History and Final Disposition*, 236; House, *Legislative Record of the 108th Legislature, 1978, Vol. 1*, 204, 297, 489.

⁵House, *Legislative Record of the 106th Legislature (First Special Session), 1974, Vol. 1*, 501; see also, House, *Legislative Record of the 107th Legislature, 1975, Vol. 1*, B716.

⁶House, *Legislative Record of the 107th Legislature, 1976, Vol. 3*, 953; House, *Legislative Record of the 108th Legislature, 1977, Vol. 1*, 391.

⁷House, *Legislative Record of the 108th Legislature, 1977, Vol. 1*, 391; "Gays' Basic Rights Defended," *Portland Press Herald*, 18 May 1977; John S. Day, "Bill to give gays equal protection is heard," *Bangor Daily News*, 18 May 1977; Maine, *Legislative Documents and Papers of the 108th Legislature, 5 January 1977 to 25 July 1977, History and Final Disposition*, 158.

⁸"State post in works for Talbot," *Portland Press Herald*, 18 March 1980, 14; "Gerald Talbot chosen for education post," *Portland Press Herald*, 18 November 1981; "Six honored for public service, receive 1980 Jefferson Awards," *Portland Press Herald*, 22 February 1980, 14.

A Place in Time: Legislative Document 1661

Known generically in its pre-law phase as Legislative Document 1661, "An act to Prohibit the Use of Offensive Names for Geographic Features and Other Places Within the State of Maine" became a Maine public law in the spring of 1977, and represents the termination of a political and personal journey that Gerald Talbot first embarked on in 1974. It was then that Talbot approached the Department of Conservation "in hopes that something would be done," only, in his estimation, to be given the runaround about changing the close to a dozen place names, "all the way from Nigger Brook to Nigger Island" that were offensive and racist.¹

Behind opposition to the proposed law were the arguments that making such changes would cost thousands of dollars, that it was an unconstitutional violation of free speech, that many geographic place names had historical significance, and that the term "offensive" was so subjective that virtually any name could be targeted for change. Despite this opposition, Talbot argued that failure to get action on this subject—something which had passed federally in 1947—was due to the role White privilege played in making this less than a priority for some members of the House.² Talbot stated:

The reason is that some of the members feel . . . that some of those names are historic and they don't want it changed. The name "nigger" is also historic as far as I am concerned. No one in this body was brought up underneath that name. I still carry the scars from that name, and my children carry the scars of that name. I have had to fight over that name. If you use that name today, you are going to get by with it. If you use it any other time, I am going to challenge you, as I have in the past....

I want that name changed. I want that name changed because it is derogatory. It is derogatory not only to me but it is derogatory to my children and my relatives. It is derogatory.³

While certainly rooted in personal experience, Talbot was making a statement that the offensive nature of the term touched not only himself, but radiated throughout the African American community. By virtue of its very presence, the term "nigger" condoned and sanc-

tioned its continued use, and was, therefore, degrading to all Black people in Maine.

In something of an ideological compromise, a measure was taken to help ensure the bill's passage. The term "offensive," because of its extensive subjectivity, was defined as or equated with the term "nigger," making it illegal to use the term, either as a distinct word or in forming some part of a word, in any place name in the state of Maine.⁴ This compromise was something of a two-edged sword, for while it did help remove a highly offensive term from the state map, the specificity of what constituted an offensive term, left the door open for the preservation of terms offensive to other members of the population. Future battles would have to be fought on the precedent, rather than on the strict content, of this law. Talbot's bill was passed in 1977, as amended, and remains one of the most culturally and philosophically significant successes of his political career.

Maine is a state very defined by and invested in its physical environment. To allow and, thus, perpetuate the term "nigger" as a part of state policy would make a very public, national statement about the state's racial politics, and about "the way life should be" in this state.

Notes

¹House, *Legislative Record of the 108th Legislature, 1977, Vol. 1*, 1109.

²*Ibid.*, 1109-1110.

³*Ibid.*, 1109.

⁴*Ibid.*, 1110; Maine, *Revised Statutes, Title 1, Section 1101-1102* (1977).

Calendar of Events

October 12 to November 21, 2000

Black Leadership: Changing the Maine Landscape

An exhibit drawing heavily on materials from the Gerald E. Talbot Collection of the African American Archives of Maine and documenting the political, social, and institutional impact of Black leadership in Maine. Area Gallery, USM Woodbury Campus Center, Portland.

October 19: Exhibit opening, with panel discussion, will take place in Woodbury Campus Center Rooms A, B, C, beginning at 7 p.m. Reception to follow. Free and open to the public. To RSVP by October 10, or if in need of special accommodation, please call Professor Maureen Elgersman Lee at (207) 780-5239 or email at elgersma@usm.maine.edu.