

Fall 2005

Bangor Literary Reading Contest

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Recommended Citation

Elgersman - Lee (ed.), Maureen, "Bangor Literary Reading Contest" (2005). *The Griot*. 24.
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African American Collection of Maine

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Reading Room Hours
Monday, Wednesday, Friday:
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From the Editor's Desk



Over and over again in their work, historians are reminded that big things come in small packages. One such "package" is a typed sheet of paper tucked inside Lida Keck Wiggins's *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (1907), a rare book in the Gerald E. Talbot Collection of the African American Collection of Maine. The paper's heading reads: BANGOR LITERARY READING CONTEST February 17, 1919. This simple, unassuming document provides a fabulous glimpse into Black life in early twentieth-century Bangor. It is also a perfect vehicle for introducing the theme of the ninth volume of the *Griot*. During the 2005-06 academic year, the *Griot* will have as its theme "Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community." "Black Bangor" is also the title of the Collection's annual exhibition, coming in February. (See Calendar of Events for more information.)

—Maureen Elgersman Lee, associate professor of history and faculty scholar for the African American Collection of Maine at USM

A Place in Time

Bangor Literary Reading Contest February 17, 1919

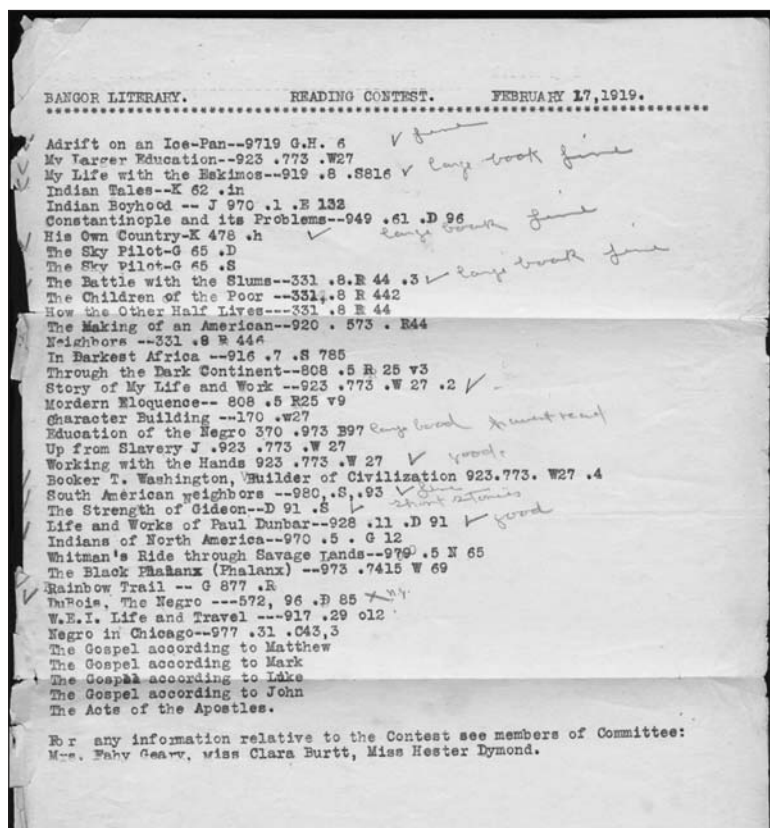
On its surface, the Bangor Literary Reading Contest list is one-dimensional. It comprises 38 separate entries, featuring diverse readings in adventure, biography, sociology, economics, history, romance, and religion. Books of note for that time include Rudyard Kipling's *Indian Tales*, Charles Alexander Eastman's *Indian Boyhood*, and Henry Morton Stanley's *In Darkest Africa*. In sum, however, the list may be characterized as reflecting a global, progressive, Christian consciousness of both color and class. New York Evening Sun photojournalist Jacob Riis authored four books on the list, including *How the Other Half Lives* and *The Children of the Poor*. Contest committee members also included the first five books of the New Testament and texts by leading African Americans of the day such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. DuBois. Of all the authors represented on the nearly 40-book list, Booker T. Washington appears to have garnered the most attention. In contrast, W.E.B. DuBois' sole entry is *The Negro*, leaving conspicuously absent his 1903 hall-mark publication, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The Bangor document's 1919 date is as telling as its content. Its compilation of literary selections came too early for Alain Locke's 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, to have been included. However, the Bangor Literary Reading Contest list alludes to the same type of Black consciousness that defined the post World War I era and shaped the Harlem Renaissance.

Similarly, this contest was seven years too early to have been tied to Carter G. Woodson's creation of Negro History Week, the precursor to Black History Month.¹

The document ends by advising interested parties of the following: "For any information relative to the Contest see members of Committee: Mrs. Fahy Geary, Miss Clara Burtt, Miss Hester Dymond." New Brunswick native Fahy Heughan Geary worked as a tailoress and was the wife of

lawyer Milton R. Geary. Clara Burtt was the Bangor-born daughter of Andrew and Maggie Burtt; Hester Dymond was the daughter of New Brunswick native Carrie Dymond. Both in their late twenties in February of 1919, Geary and Burtt went on to become charter members of the NAACP's Bangor branch when it was organized in late 1920 and officially chartered in early 1921.² Interestingly enough, the book, in which this document is found, belonged to Clara Burtt. Based on its inscription, the book had previously belonged to Burtt's aunt, Victoria Matheas, but was given to Clara on her birthday. Burtt may have received the book in 1908 when she visited her aunt in Philadelphia, a trip that Burtt recorded as the "best of [her] young life."³



The Bangor Literary Contest reading list leaves several questions unanswered. It does not tell us, for example, if Geary, Burtt, and Dymond were the only committee members or who other members were. We do not know what informed the committee's literary choices or whether the sheet was a preliminary or final draft. Was this contest a one-time event or was it a tradition? Was this the work of a distinct society or was it a subcom-
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Calendar of Events

Events will take place at the USM Glickman Family Library, 314 Forest Avenue, Portland, Maine.

Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine Annual Event

The Ties That Bind: Experiences of Family in Maine, 1900-Present

Opening reception: October 27, 2005, 5:00-7:00 p.m. **Weekly Scholar Talks:** November 1, 8, and 15, 6:30-8:00 p.m.

African American Collection of Maine Annual Exhibition

Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community

Exhibition Opening: February 3, 2006, *Snow date:* February 10, 2006

Exhibition Preview: 4:00-5:00 p.m., *Program and Reception:* 5:00-6:00 p.m., *Book signing:* 6:00-7:00 p.m. *Reception continues*

For more programming information, visit our online events calendar at: <http://library.usm.maine.edu/specialcollections/events.html>

Save These Dates!

October 27, 2005

February 3, 2006

In Review

Lida Keck Wiggins. *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Naperville, Illinois and Memphis, Tennessee: J. L. Nichols & Company, 1907.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872. His father, Joshua Dunbar, escaped from slavery and took refuge in Canada (probably present day Ontario), before returning to the United States and enlisting in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry. His mother, Matilda, had been enslaved in Kentucky. Her marriage to Joshua Dunbar was her second, and Paul appears to have been her only child. When Matilda Dunbar disputed her husband's choice of name, he reputedly replied: "Matilda Madam, don't you know that the Bible says Paul was a great man? This child will be great some day and do you honor." (p.26) Paul Laurence Dunbar, the man with the name his mother regarded as too old-fashioned, did indeed do his mother proud. An honors student, the editor of his high school's monthly publication, and the composer of his senior class song, Dunbar was forced to accept work as an elevator operator after graduation. Dunbar's talent would not remain hidden for long, and during his 33-year life, he enjoyed the esteem of various

notable persons including Frederick Douglass, Mary Church Terrell, Booker T. Washington, and Theodore Roosevelt. A key turning point in Dunbar's life came in 1898 when he resigned his position in the Library of Congress Reading Room—and its \$720 per year salary—to focus completely on his literary pursuits.

Such are some of the highlights of Dunbar's life, as related by Wiggins. From this point in the narrative, Wiggins chronicles Dunbar's marriage, his writing, and health problems until his death in 1906. Part Two of *The Life and Works* is a collection of Dunbar's poems, and Part Three is what Wiggins considered the best of his short stories. Dunbar's work varies from the religious to the quotidian. Some writing is nostalgic and romantic, some is political and satirical, some is disappointed and disillusioned. In sum, *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar* should be considered in its own words: a tribute to a "short, feverish, brilliant life" for which "the world was too sad a place." (p. 136)

Recent Publications

The following books were reviewed in recent issues of the *Journal of African American History* (formerly the *Journal of Negro History*), and may be of interest to *Griot* readers.

Vol. 89, no. 4 (Fall 2004)

Katherine Tate. *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in the U.S. Congress*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. [Reviewed by Lewis A. Randolph, Ohio University]

Tate offers historical analysis of the presence, absence, treatment, and symbolic value of African Americans in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Vol. 90, nos. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 2005)

Abdul Alkalimat. *The African American Experience in Cyberspace: A Resource Guide to the Best Web Sites on Black Culture and History*. London: Pluto Press, 2004. [Reviewed by Donna Thompson Ray, CUNY Graduate Center]

Alkalimat, moderator of H-Net's list serve, H-Afro-Am, compiles an extensive inventory of Internet sources useful to researchers as well as to the general public.

Lewis V. Baldwin and Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid. *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. [Reviewed by Mark L. Chapman, Fordham University]

This book of nine essays is the product of ten years' worth of research and debate on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. as catalysts for important dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Bangor Literary Reading Contest

continued

mittee of an existing organization—African American or otherwise? For some people, however, the most important questions might be more elementary: Who entered the contest? Who won? What was the prize?

After having weighed the presence of concrete information against its absence, one can make some solid conclusions. Committee members were both literate and literary—that is, they knew how to read and write, but they also valued literary pursuits and products. They were engaged in discourse surrounding the history and conditions of people of color globally and of the poor. Despite being removed from major American publishing centers, they were cognizant of the world around them and of Black literary production. Because each of the books has a corresponding Dewey System call number, committee members were seemingly adroit library patrons. Rather than "Bangor Literary Reading Contest," this sheet of paper might well have been captioned "The New Negro in Bangor, Maine."

Notes

1. See Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925), various editions are available; Jacqueline Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 84.

2. Fourteenth (1920) and Fifteenth (1930) Censuses of the United States (manuscript), microfilm, Maine State Archives, Augusta, Maine; Application for Charter of Bangor, Maine Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, October 1920, NAACP Branch Files, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

3. Newspaper clipping in *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Gerald E. Talbot Collection. The notation is assumed to have been Burt's.