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**HOME IS WHERE I MAKE IT – ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
AA MS 6**

**Total Boxes: 4  
Oversize Drawers: 1  
Linear Feet: 5**

**By  
Marieke Van Der Steenhoven**

**Portland, Maine  
May 2010, Feb & Dec 2012**

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## **Administrative Information**

Provenance: Created for the African American Collection of Maine. Compiled and donated by Maureen Elgersman Lee, 2002-2004.

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Cite as: Home Is Where I Make It - Oral History Collection, African American Collection of Maine, Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine, University of Southern Maine Libraries.

Restrictions on access: None

## **Historical Sketch**

This oral history project was directed by Dr. Maureen Elgersman Lee, of USM, and Rachel Talbot Ross, and took place in two phases, the Greater Portland area in 2001 and Lewiston-Auburn in 2003.

This project was an inter-generational study of African American activism in Greater Portland and Lewiston-Auburn, Maine, bringing together high school students and local residents in an interview setting to create textual, oral, and visual records of African American cultural retention and day-to-day activism in institutional/social change.

Funding for the project came from a University of Maine System Grant Program for Collaborative Projects on Maine's Cultural Heritage.

The Greater Portland project was a collaborative effort between the directors, the Williams Temple Church of God in Christ, the Green Memorial AME Zion Church, and Ms. Julia Wise and her class from Portland High School. The "Home Is Where I Make It" project recorded via interviews and photographs the oral histories of ten African Americans in Portland, South Portland, and Gorham, Maine. The project participants—five men and five women born inside and outside the state—had lived in Maine for at least fifteen years. Most participants, however, had lived in Maine for more than twenty years. Ms. Julia Wise and her Portland High School class helped create the interview questionnaire and helped conduct the interviews. Williams Temple Church of God in Christ provided interview space and helped identify potential interviewees. Green Memorial AME Zion Church also collaborated on the project, with several interviewees being drawn from that congregation.

This project highlights Black history and struggle for community in southern Maine and yet celebrates the variety of ways in which the participants' day-to-day activities and formal organizational memberships may be understood as activism. With widely varying experience in Maine and abroad, these ten often unassuming individuals continue to leave indelible imprints on their communities as the keepers of tradition and as agents of social change. They have bravely and frankly confronted what it means to make their homes in Maine, while radiating a willingness to invest their own time, energy, and resources to make it a better place for people of color and for the state as a whole.

Inspired by this oral history project, the University of Southern Maine in September 2001 held a four-day symposium titled "I Make My Home in Maine: Honoring Black and African Heritage." The symposium featured speakers, including Nobel Prize winning author Wole Soyinka, a tour of Underground Railroad sites in the Old Port, an art exhibition at the Museum of African Tribal Art, and an African drumming ceremony.

In 2003, there was a second iteration of "Home Is Where I Make It." The specific purpose of this project was to interview ten African-Americans who reside in Lewiston/Auburn, Maine, for the purpose of understanding what it means for a Black person to live and work in the twin cities. Of particular interest were general familial and educational backgrounds; the varieties of jobs Blacks have historically held; whether African-Americans are found in the mill history of Lewiston/Auburn; Black professionals and entrepreneurs; and the history of race relations as perceived by Black residents. Collaborators included L/A Excels who offered office space for conducting interviews, *Lewiston Sun Journal* who facilitated public information about the project, and the Christ Temple Church of God in Christ, a predominantly Black church in Auburn.

According to scholarship, the city of Lewiston hosted one of the state's largest Black populations in the mid to late 1800s, a time period in which the economy of the area was very much identified with its mills. Lewiston is one of only two Maine cities to have elected African-American mayors; Augusta is the other. Androscoggin County, of which Lewiston and Auburn are part, was also home to Ku Klux Klan members during the strong nativist movement in Maine during the 1920s. According to the 2002 Census summaries, there are 383 self-identified "Black or African-American" residents in Lewiston, or 1.1% of a population of 35,690. In Auburn, there are 137 self-identified "Black or African-American" residents, or 0.6% of a total population of 23,203. Collectively, Blacks number more than 500 in the two cities, with the numbers climbing to a combined figure of 780 when including those who self-identify as Black but note at least one other racial origin.

This project argues that because African Americans have occupied an ultra-minority status as less than 1 percent of the total state population, the activism of both Black men and women in Maine has reflected the reality of their historical exclusion from recognized platforms of power. This project revisits the fundamental principles of activism with the premise that there is a record of daily activism that exists in the memories of the people and a record of activism in their collective, largely unwritten histories. "Home Is Where I Make It" has sought to preserve this repository of information that was otherwise in jeopardy of being lost by the documented out-migration of African Americans and by increased age and mortality among those African Americans who remain in the state.

### **Description of the Collection**

The Collection includes transcripts, photographs and audiotapes from the two phases of the project, which documented African American life in the Greater Portland and Lewiston-Auburn areas. Also included are the display pieces from the exhibitions of the results of the two phases of the project. The exhibition of the Lewiston-Auburn phase was held at USM Lewiston Auburn College on 2004 Feb 2 – Mar 29.

Box	Folder	Description	Date(s)
<b>Series 1.1 Greater Portland Project. Transcripts</b>			
1	1	Transcript, Anderson, Edgar	2001 Jun 4
1	2	Transcript, Barrett, Odessa	2001 May 31
1	3	Transcript, Bowens, Beverly	2001 Mar 31
1	4	Transcript, Jackson, Rose	2001 Mar 31
1	5	Transcript, Mathews, James	2001 Mar 31
1	6	Transcript, McKenzie, June	2001 May 23
1	7	Transcript, Richardson, Rupert	2001 Mar 31
1	8	Transcript, Sheppard, James	2001 Mar 31
1	9	Transcript, Tarrence, Richard	2002 May 17
1	10	Transcript, Young, Lucille	2001 Mar 31
<b>Series 1.2 Greater Portland Project. Photographs</b>			
1	11	Negatives	undated
1	12	CDs and proofsheets	undated
1	13	Photographs 5 x 7	undated
1	14	Headshots, Anderson	2001 Jun 4
1	15	Headshots, Barrett	2001 May 31
1	16	Headshots, Bowens	2001 Mar 31
2	17	Headshots, Jackson	undated
2	18	Headshots, Mathews	2001 Mar 31
2	19	Headshots, McKenzie	2001 May 23
2	20	Headshots, Sheppard	2001 Mar 31
2	21	Headshots, Tarrence	2002 May 17
2	22	Headshots, Young	2001 Mar 31
<b>Series 1.3 Greater Portland Project. Recordings</b>			
3		Box of audiocassettes. Includes Odessa Barrett; Edgar Anderson (part two of the interview continues on Odessa Barrett's cassette; James Mathews; R. Tarrence; Rupert Richardson; Beverly Bowens; June McKenzie; Lucille Young; James Sheppard (2 c.)	2001 Mar 31, May 23
3		Box of audiocassettes. Includes Rose Jackson (2 c.); James Sheppard (2 c.); Rupert Richardson; Beverly Bowens; Lucille Young; June McKenzie	2001 Mar 31- Jun 4
<b>Series 1.4 Greater Portland Project. Exhibition</b>			
4		Mounted text and photographs comprising the Exhibition	[2001?]
5		Mounted text and photographs comprising the Exhibition See Oversize	
<b>Series 2.1 Lewiston-Auburn Project. Transcripts</b>			
2	23	Transcript, Boley-Lee, Joanna	2003 Jun 4
2	24	Transcript, Jackson Albert and Clemmie	2003 May 5

Box	Folder	Description	Date(s)
2	25	Transcript, Jackson, Emma	2003 Apr 30
2	26	Transcript, Knowles, Neville	2003 Jun 4
<b>Series 2.1 Lewiston-Auburn Project. Transcripts (cont.)</b>			
2	27	Transcript, Muhhamad, Wahidah	2003 Jun 16
2	28	Transcript, Nichols, Margaret	2003 Jun 3
2	29	Transcript, Taylor, Jim	2003 May 15
<b>Series 2.2 Lewiston-Auburn Project. Photographs</b>			
2	30	Headshots, Boley-Lee, Joanna	undated
2	31	Headshots, Hull-Chandler	undated
2	32	Headshots, Jackson, Albert and Clemmie	undated
2	33	Headshots, Jackson, Emma	undated
2	34	Headshots, Jenkins, John	undated
2	35	Headshots, Knowles, Neville	undated
2	36	Headshots, Muhhamad, Wahidah	undated
2	37	Headshots, Nichols, Margaret	undated
2	38	Headshots, Taylor, Jim	undated
<b>Series 2.3 Lewiston-Auburn Project. Recordings</b>			
3		Audiocassette, Joanna Boley-Lee	2003 June 4
3		Audiocassette, Carrie Hull-Chandler	2003 May 1
3		Audiocassette, Albert Jackson and Clemmie Jackson	2003 May 5
3		Audiocassette, Emma Jackson	2003 Apr 30
3		Audiocassette, John Jenkins	2003 May 9
3		Audiocassette, Neville Knowles	2003 Jun 4
3		Audiocassette, Wahidah Muhammad	2003 Jun 16
3		Audiocassette, Margaret Nichols	2003 Jun 3
<b>Series 2.4 Lewiston-Auburn Project. Exhibition</b>			
O/s Dr 35		Exhibition guest book	[2004]
		Mounted text and photographs comprising the exhibition See Oversize	[2004]
<b>Series 3. Oversize</b>			
5		Mounted text and photographs comprising the Greater Portland Exhibition	
O/s Dr 35		Exhibition guest book	[2004]
		Mounted text and photographs comprising the Lewiston Auburn exhibition	[2004]