

Fall 2001

## Portland Area Oral History - Beverly Bowens - Rose Jackson

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

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# THE GRIOT

Preserving  
African American  
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

Volume 5, Issue 1  
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## African American Archives of Maine

### Public Hours

Tuesday: 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.,  
1:30-4:45 p.m.  
Wednesday: 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.;  
1:30-4:45 p.m.

### Archives Contacts

Maureen Elgersman Lee, faculty scholar  
(207) 780-5239

Susie Bock, special collections librarian  
(207) 780-4269

David Andreasen, archives assistant  
(207) 780-5492

Please note that the African American Archives of Maine is located on the second floor of the Gorham library until the renovations to the Portland library are finished.

## Advisory Committee Members

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## From the Editor's Desk



Maureen Elgersman Lee

"How was your summer?" It is the perennial question asked at this time of year, second only to "Where did the summer go?" For many people, including myself, it was a busy one—research, conferences, workshops, meetings. Where *did* the summer go? The most tragic aspect of the summer is that I can count on (only) one hand the number of times that I have had lobster. According to my family in Canada, it is almost criminal and certainly immoral to live in Maine and not eat lobster at least once a week. It's something akin to crossing the border on the way home without stopping at the duty free. For shame.

The theme of this edition of the *Griot* contemplates the idea of home—coming home, going home, being home, making home, defining home—through the voices of some local residents. In fact, each edition of the *Griot* through the summer of 2002 will profile African Americans from the Portland area who participated in the African American Archives'

### A PLACE IN TIME:

## Beverly Bowens "I came back, as most of us do."

Beverly Bowens was born in Portland. She grew up on Munjoy Hill, a place that she remembers as "a wonderful neighborhood" with a diverse population that included Black, Italian, and Irish residents. Bowens recounts what a beautiful thing it was to see the Federal Street market and how much of a treat it was for neighbors to take her swimming on the Eastern Promenade in the summer. One of Bowens' most treasured memories, however, is the day that she and her brother were photographed at the ice cream counter at Rankin's Drugstore, a local business that stood at the corner of Portland's Lafayette and Congress streets. Fond for Bowens are the memories of the store's marble counter, its mahogany interior, and even of the dress she wore that day.

During her early teen years, Bowens began washing dishes in the kitchen at Mercy Hospital; by the time she was a senior she had been 'promoted' and was dusting in the operating room. Beverly Bowens graduated from Portland High School, and returned to Mercy Hospital, attending and graduating from its School of Nursing. She soon moved to New York City and earned three degrees from

oral history project entitled, "Home Is Where I Make It: African American Activism and Community in Greater Portland, Maine."\* The project collected interviews from ten African Americans—five men and five women—who are at least 50 years of age and who have lived in Maine for at least ten consecutive years. The participants have a variety of different experiences, some were born in Maine and others migrated to the area at different points in their lives. In some cases, these migrations took place thirty to forty years ago, and the migrants have woven themselves into the fabric of Portland community and activism.

The 2001-02 academic year at the University of Southern Maine is a convocation year; its theme is "Diaspora: Meanings of Home." Please check for more details about the upcoming public introduction of the "Home Is Where I Make It" project as part of the "I Make My Home in Maine" weekend of events, September 20-22.

\*Note: This project has been made possible in part by a grant from the University of Maine System, in partnership with the Maine Humanities Council.

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

Columbia University: an undergraduate degree in nursing and two graduate degrees, one in nursing administration and another in institutional education. Bowens remained in New York for several years. She married, had a daughter, and tragically lost her surgeon husband very early in their marriage. A widowed mother, Bowens remained in the nursing profession, impacting the recruitment of nurses of color and helping to raise nursing standards.

About her return to Maine and to Portland, Bowens ties her migration and subsequent return to others, stating summarily, "I came back, as most of us do." And about being from Maine, Bowens admits, "I'm very sensitive about being from Maine and I think it will take all of us to make Maine what we would like it to be. To make us strong, to make us economically viable...[W]e aren't as together as we would like to be, and that will give the city strength and that will give the state strength."

[From: Interview with Beverly Bowens, March 31, 2001, Portland, Maine. "Home Is Where I Make It" Project, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine.]

**A PLACE IN TIME:****Rose Jackson "We're all in this thing together."**

A native of Jackson, Mississippi, Rose Jackson has lived in Maine for thirty-nine years. Originally working on her parents' farm in Mississippi, Rose Jackson married at the tender age of 15. She soon began working as a domestic: cleaning, cooking, washing, and sometimes taking care of children—a vocation introduced by her grandmother when she took young Rose to her job. Upon her sister's recommendation that "Maine was a good place," Jackson's husband moved to Maine in the 1960s; he then sent for his wife and their five children to join him. Jackson fell in love with Maine, largely because of the caring people that she encountered. She continued to work as a domestic, pointing out that she could make more money in Maine. Having matriculated through the eighth grade, Jackson says that one of the best things she did in her life was return to school. Jackson enrolled in Portland High night school when she was in her thirties; her children went to school in the day and she attended at night. A fiercely independent Jackson celebrates, "And I did it on my

own.... And it was just a wonderful thing."

A former member of Green Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church and a faithful member of Williams Temple Church of God in Christ, Jackson looks at life in greater Portland this way, "We're all in this thing together, regardless [of the] color [of] our skin....I would never pass a white person on the street and down on the ground unless I stop and check and see what's wrong with him.... That's the way I am because we're all God's children." Jackson's perspective is manifest in the various forms of outreach she has engaged in over her nearly four decades in Maine. In the past she voluntarily ran a community center for low-income families; today she continues to visit elderly, sick, or shut-in people and is willing to offer help to anyone who asks. Jackson assures "when they call me, I'm there for them."

[From: Interview with Rose Jackson, March 31, 2001, Portland, Maine. "Home Is Where I Make It" Project, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine.]

**Alvin Poussaint, M.D.**

For colleagues in public health, medicine, education, psychiatry, or other related fields, or for those who remember *The Cosby Show* credits, Alvin Poussaint is a familiar name. Dr. Alvin Poussaint is a clinical professor of psychiatry and faculty associate dean for student affairs at Harvard Medical School. He is also director of the Media Center at Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston. A graduate of Columbia and Cornell universities, Poussaint is an author, psychiatrist, educator, and social critic, with expertise in nonviolent parenting, racism and mental health, and media and society. He has published dozens of articles, both academic and popular, and has authored, co-authored, and contributed to a number of books, including his most recent, *Lay My Burden Down: Unraveling Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis Among African Americans*.

**Spring Semester 2002 Course Offerings****HTY 1421 African American History Since 1865**

This course introduces students to the basic people, events, and ideas of late-19th and 20th-century African American history. Topics include Reconstruction, the Black Women's Club Movement, the Harlem Renaissance, Blacks in World War I and II, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black popular culture. No prerequisites; 3.0 credit hours.

**HTY 399 Caribbean Women**

This course represents a new opportunity to explore the history of Black women in the Caribbean. Topics will include slavery, labor, colonialism and post-colonialism, migration, and activism. No prerequisites; 3.0 credit hours. Check USM guides to Spring 2002 registration, or contact Professor Elgersman Lee at 780-5239 or e-mail [elgersma@usm.maine.edu](mailto:elgersma@usm.maine.edu)

**I MAKE MY HOME IN MAINE:****Honoring Black and African Heritage**

Weekend of events, September 20-22, on the campuses of the University of Southern Maine and the University of New England and around the City of Portland.

Sponsored by Key Bank, City of Portland, Maine Medical Center, University of New England, University of Southern Maine, Borders Books and Music, WGME Channel 13, and USM College of Nursing and Health Professions.

Weekend highlights include:

**Thursday, September 20**

- Third Anniversary Celebration and Exhibit Opening, "Role of the Ancestors and Vessels of Healing," 11:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., The Museum of African Tribal Art, 122 Spring Street, Portland.
- Masquerade dance and drumming, 3:30-5:00 p.m., The Museum of African Tribal Art.

**Friday, September 21**

- Public introduction of "Home Is Where I Make It," the oral history project of the African American Archives of Maine; keynote address by Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Harvard Medical School/Judge Baker Children's Center, 7:00-9:00 p.m., Luther Bonney Auditorium, USM Portland campus. Book signing to follow.

**Saturday, September 22**

- Business meeting of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, New England Chapter, 10:00 a.m.-noon, Woodbury Campus Center, USM Portland campus.
- Lecture by Dr. David J. Malebranche, Emory University, on race as a social construct, noon-2:00 p.m., Woodbury Campus Center, USM Portland campus.
- Underground Railroad Tour of Portland: Munjoy Hill and the Old Port, 2:30-4:00 p.m. Departing from Woodbury Campus Center, USM Portland campus.
- Film, *Lost Boundaries*, chronicling a Black doctor's mid-20th-century sojourn to Maine, discussion to follow, 6:00-8:00 p.m., University of New England, Westbrook College campus. For updated information contact Professor Maureen Elgersman Lee at 780-5239 or [elgersma@usm.maine.edu](mailto:elgersma@usm.maine.edu).