

THE GRIOT

Preserving
African American
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

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African American Collection of Maine

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From the Editor's Desk

We have all been indoctrinated into the culture of waiting. As children, we are taught to wait our turn. Patience is a virtue, after all. In the military, people are trained to hurry up and wait. Good things come to those who wait, and anything worth having is worth waiting for. But waiting has its good points. Waiting in line encourages order, waiting at a red light helps ensure safety, and waiting for a plane, well, that just builds character.

On a more serious note, the waiting and heightened anticipation of the Glickman Family Library renovations came to end in mid April, with the university and local community celebrating in grand style. A centerpiece of the ceremonies was the opening of the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine which houses the African American Collection of Maine and two other collections, the LGBT Collection and the Judaica Collection. Located on the Glickman Library's sixth floor, the Sampson Center is architecturally stunning, and welcomes patrons with its beautiful woodwork and attractive lighting.

The final edition of the *Griot* for this academic year profiles Carrie Hull-Chandler and John Jenkins, the last two participants in the "Home Is Where I Make It: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine" oral history project, and identifies some of the project's findings. I hope that you will find that this was worth waiting for as well.

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



Maureen Elgersman Lee

Carrie Hull-Chandler: "I've worn many hats."

Carrie Hull-Chandler was born in Hampton, Virginia, and has lived in Lewiston-Auburn for more than thirty-five years. Her father, William, was a bricklayer, and her mother, Mary, did domestic work. Hull-Chandler moved to Boston, where she went to high school and two years of business college. In Maine, Carrie Hull-Chandler began work for the New England Telephone Company, which later became Nynex, and is now Verizon. In all, she worked for the telephone company for twenty-nine years before retiring in 1995.

When asked to name any prominent African Americans in Lewiston and Auburn that she might know, Carrie Hull-Chandler was quick to mention former Lewiston mayor, John Jenkins, whom she remembers as a student at Bates College, and James Reese, a dean at Bates College, whom she describes as a man with "wonderful integrity." Lee Corbin, Carrie Hull-Chandler's brother, passed away a few years ago, but during his life, he was a food service manager at the Augusta Mental Health Institute (AMHI), before he went into business for himself and opened Corbin's Diner on Lisbon Street in Lewiston.

Mary Hull, Carrie Hull-Chandler's late mother-in-law, was one of several African Americans to work in the twin cities' factories and mills. In the 1970s, Mary Hull worked second shift—3 p.m. until 11 p.m.—at Bates Mill on Canal Street. According to her daughter-in-law, "[A]s far as I know, she never had any complaints about working there at all."

As with several of the individuals who were interviewed for this project, conversation with Carrie Hull-Chandler quickly turned to the subject of the late Elder Isaac L. Jackson, pastor of Auburn's Christ Temple Church of God in Christ, who passed away 31 January 2003. Carrie Hull-Chandler is one of the original members of the church and continues to be one of its staunchest supporters:

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instructor, professional dancer,
motivational speaker, Lewiston mayor,
[Maine] state senator.”

Known, perhaps equally, as the former mayor of Lewiston and a world-class martial arts champion, Jenkins has brought significant exposure to Lewiston and the surrounding communities. He continues to speak affectionately of the city that he has served and in which he still resides:

“Lewiston is a town that will give you a chance. They gave Muhammad Ali a chance in 1965 when everybody else said ‘No.’ I was fortunate to be here. The community really supported me in a number of ways in the past.”

John Jenkins’ athletic, political, and professional contacts have allowed him to travel extensively across the United States and around the world. Still, the fundamental realities of a working-class life in a mill town like Lewiston are not lost on him. He is sensitive to the recruitment of Franco-Americans to the area’s mills, but is still keenly aware of the mills’ place in African American labor history:

“Maybe the Franco-American and African American histories aren’t too far apart in some respects. Labor in the mills was just brutal. You had to have some strong resolve to just survive in those kind of work conditions.”

[From: Interview with John Jenkins, May 2003, Lewiston, Maine; “Home Is Where I Make It’: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine” Oral History Collection, African American Collection of Maine.]

John Jenkins:

“[T]he Franco-American and African American histories aren’t too far apart[.]”

John Jenkins was born in New Jersey, and has lived in Lewiston for more than thirty years.

Jenkins seems to have come by his character and drive naturally, as his father was both a construction worker and a Baptist minister and his mother worked for the A&P grocery store chain, where she cleaned, mended, and pressed workers’ smocks. John Jenkins came to Maine as a freshman at Lewiston’s Bates College, and he reflected on the value of that experience:

“I graduated with a B.A. in psychology. I chose to stick it out at least that first year,

and then it became another year. I really wanted to get out of here in the worst way because I was unhappy. I was uncomfortable. But then I realized that, perhaps, challenges help you to grow. And so, whether I’ve grown in the right directions, who knows. Hopefully I’m a better and different person than I was when I first got here.”

A man of many talents, John Jenkins has a varied and engaging professional portfolio:

“You name it, I’ve done it. Salesman, Multicultural Marketing and Business Development Director, martial arts

“Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine”: Project Findings

This instalment of the “Home Is Where I Make It” project has been markedly different from the initial phase which centered on the themes of community and activism. Race and labor (or class) are ideas that go to the heart of Americans’ struggle with equality. The discussion of race and class, although essential to critical analysis, can also become contentious, since race has been used historically to deflect issues that are actually based in class distinction and privilege. In a nutshell, race complicates issues of labor (or class), and labor (or class) complicates issues of race. Despite the potential hazards of this type of work, however, the investigation of race and labor in Lewiston and Auburn has created durable interviews and engaging results.

African Americans have been part of the industrial history of Lewiston and Auburn. While they were not courted in any fashion similar to Franco-American workers,

Blacks did work in various complexes, including the Bates Mill, Libbey Mill, Norway Shoes, and sundry other shoe factories. Most of the project’s evidence is anecdotal, rather than statistical, and the sampling of interviewees is admittedly small, but African American work ranged from the unskilled to the managerial.

Outside of the area’s mills and factories, African Americans held various political, medical, educational, administrative, janitorial, and proprietary positions. As many classic studies of Black labor and Black communities have illustrated, African Americans’ own definition of prominence does not adhere to a strict labor hierarchy. Prominence may be a product of educational or financial achievement, but it is also a product of hard work, good character, and long term residency. This helps explain why a core group of individuals, past and present, came up again and again in the interviews. Two persons of particular note are George Ross,

a Bates graduate whose Elm Street ice cream shop was a Lewiston fixture by the late 1920s, and Isaac L. Jackson, late pastor of Christ Temple Church, remembered for his leadership, his faith, and his always moving rendition of “I Won’t Complain.” When it comes to labor, it seems that less emphasis is placed on what one does, with more value placed on that one does and how one does. Personal integrity and honest labor, whether domestic, janitorial, political, or entrepreneurial, emerge in these interviews as the standard by Black workers are esteemed and, seemingly, remembered.