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A Place in Time: Maria Osborne and Her Daughters, Waterville

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In Memoriam: Earl R. Johnson (1910-2007)

A few years ago, I was a guest columnist for the Portland Press Herald. In that column, I used a visit to a man in Bangor to introduce the idea that history can be seen as a collection of stories told of the nobility of everyday living, a history that comes through contact with great people. The man I visited and used to frame that article was Earl Johnson. Mr. Johnson and I met when I began researching my book, Black Bangor, and we stayed in touch over the years.

Earl Johnson was born in Bangor in February 1910, to William A. Johnson and Edith Delaney Johnson. He resided and worked in Bangor, and lived out his days in the Kossuth Street home his father built. Johnson was a friend to many and known for his love of family, music, radios, and boats.

One of the Collection’s most important moments was a few years ago when Earl Johnson, his daughter, son-in-law, and extended family members came to the USM Glickman Family Library for the opening reception of the Sampson Center’s “The Ties That Bind” exhibition on the histories of select Maine families. Johnson’s family was featured in the exhibition and he was visibly moved.

—Maureen Elgersman Lee, associate professor of history and faculty scholar for the African American Collection of Maine at USM
A Place in Time:
Maria Osborne and Her Daughters, Waterville

Continuing the focus on African Americans in Central Maine, this issue of the Griot highlights the women of the Osborne family. Although often overshadowed by the history of her husband, Samuel, and her son, Edward, Maria Osborne's story is engaging, as are those of her daughters. Born in Virginia in the mid 1830s, Maria Ivey(r)son seemed destined to marry Samuel Osborne, her childhood playmate and fellow slave. After becoming husband and wife, the peculiar institution still forced them to move around Virginia. After the Civil War, the Osborne family migrated to Maine, but in staggered fashion: Samuel arrived in Maine in 1865 and Maria, reportedly, came a year later. Jumping ahead some years, the 1880 federal census records the Osbornes living in Waterville. Samuel Osborne was a janitor at Colby College and Maria Osborne kept house. In addition to son, Edward, five daughters are listed in the Ash Street household: Flora, 26; Amelia, 22; Annie, 11; Alice, 8; Marion, 1. According to the census, both Flora and Amelia were born in Virginia; Annie, Alice, and Marion were Maine natives.

If Samuel Osborne made Colby College a nurturing place, then Maria Osborne made their home equally so. She has been described as having “absolute supremacy in every department of culinary achievement.” This photograph of Maria Osborne and a Colby student, however, is a study in contrasts—race, class, gender, age, past, and future. The other Osborne women led unique lives, lives that also intersected with Colby College. Amelia Osborne, for example, became a Colby College dorm mother and Marion graduated from Colby in 1900.

There is more to learn about the Osborne women, and due diligence to their histories will mean scouring a wide variety of sources. To have a complete, balanced understanding of the Osborne family’s place in the histories of both Colby College and the Waterville community, it is essential to shine the light on its women.

Notes
1. Frederick Morgan Padelford, Samuel Osborne, Janitor (Boston: L. Phillips, 1913), 4-9.
2. 1880 Federal Census, Waterville, Kennebec, Maine.