

Summer 1999

Revisiting the Johnson Family

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THE

GRIOT



Preserving
African American
History in Maine

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From the Editor's Desk

Last spring a good friend asked me to speak to the students at her elementary school. As I drove to the school, I recited the research findings from my trips to Quebec and Nova Scotia where I had researched the history of black women. Upon entering the school and hearing the boisterous laughter of the students, I was terrified. This was not an audience of college students who understood the concepts of credit hours and tuition fees, or of people who appreciated the value of microfilmed census or church records. Right then and there I realized that I needed a hook; I needed some governing idea to introduce historical information and, more important, to keep the students' attention. Rather than introduce myself as an historian, I decided to call myself a "ghost chaser." After the obligatory *Ghostbuster* jokes, the students settled down and in the surprisingly free-flowing conversation that evolved, we discussed slavery, the search for historical records, and the challenges of "chasing ghosts." I left the school relieved. The students had not rushed the stage and I had come up with a novel idea in a serious pinch.



Maureen Elgersman Lee

Since then, the sensations of ghost chasing have stayed with me, haunted me even, as I poured over 18th-century documents in finishing my book, *Unyielding Spirits*. When I began working on the "Re-membering Maine's Past" photographs (the topic of the previous edition of the *Griot*), the emotions became more pronounced. Images in the photographs seemed to meet my gaze; others seemed to look right through me, postured and omniscient, as material vestiges of lives now over. The need to know who these people were and what their lives were like has driven my research over the past six months.

This edition of the *Griot* extends the research on the Johnson family of Bangor that was introduced in the previous edition. It also serves to announce a research/publication project that is underway and to appeal to the community for photographs. The book project uses the working title of "Re-membering Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1885-1925" and will look critically at the Black community, including its institutions, identity, and sustenance. It is a joint project of the African American Archives at the University of Southern Maine and the John B. Russwurm Center at Bowdoin College.

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

In this Issue:
A Call for Photographs

A Place in Time: Revisiting the Johnson Family of Bangor

When William A. Johnson left his birthplace of Norfolk, Virginia, and arrived in Bangor, Maine, in 1870, he was a young man of no more than 20 years. A child of the slave era and a young man of Reconstruction, Johnson may have been disillusioned with the South and decided to seek out personal and professional opportunities in the North. When Johnson died in 1913, he left behind a wife, a large family, and a name that was synonymous with quality and service among Bangor merchants and clients.

William Johnson was a recognized part of the Bangor business community as early as the mid-1880s. The Bangor directory shows that Johnson operated a business cleaning and pressing clothes; it

was aptly called "Johnsons." Prosperity required Johnson to move to a larger building that would accommodate his business. In the Broad Street building that he owned, William Johnson branched out into dealing in second-hand merchandise. "See Johnson First" became a popular adage in the community, as people knew that they could find most of what they needed or wanted there. Whether it was costumes, jewelry, tools, or musical instruments, people of Bangor knew that William Johnson had it or would get it.

The appreciation of music and musical instruments is a thread that runs through much of the Johnson family. A son and later proprietor of "Johnsons," W. Alonzo Johnson attended the University of Maine and played for more than 25 years in the Bangor Symphony Orchestra. Daughter Vivian, a striking photograph of

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Edith Johnson and child

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The Johnson Family

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whom can be found in the Bangor High School *Oracle* of 1918, was fond of playing the cello, while her sister, Doris, favored the piano. Their brother, Earl, taught radio repair and servicing, beginning in an upstairs room in his father's building.

While the Johnson family appears to have been a part of the Black middle class that was emerging throughout the country, it was not immune to personal tragedy. Four years prior to William Johnson's death, a 12-year-old daughter, Ruth Pauline, died. A son, Cecil, died in 1916, a few years after his father. At only 23 years of age, Cecil Johnson left behind a young family.

Tragedy was known to the Johnsons, but family cohesion, as symbolized by the family's home at 24 Kossuth, must have been its anchor. Edith Mae Johnson, a native of St. Thomas, did not remarry after her husband's death, and probably played an important leadership role in the family. Returning to the city directory, one finds evidence of various Johnson children living at this address as young adults. W. Alonzo Johnson and his wife, Villa, lived in the family home in the 1920s, at which time they would have had at least one child. Julia Johnson, a stenographer who worked on French Street, lived at 24 Kossuth until she moved to Boston, around 1927. Evelyn, who worked for a time as a domestic at 745 Hammond Street, also resided at the family home.

This brief profile of the Johnson family allows a glimpse of the middle class. Some of the children continued the business that their father had begun;

others developed professional careers outside of commerce. Musical training and performance, often regarded as classic markers of the American middle class, are clearly present. The family home at 24 Kossuth may have been a respite from a harsh world, but it may have also taught children critical lessons about the importance of property ownership, of generating economic stability for the next generation, or, simply, of family. Most of the surviving Johnson children eventually moved out of state. Earl Johnson still lives in Bangor. Next February will mark his 90th birthday.

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Call for Photographs

Do you have photographs of African Americans in Bangor taken between 1885 and 1925?

The "Re-membering Bangor" project is looking for photographs to include in a forthcoming book on the African American community in Bangor. Of particular interest are photos that depict African Americans in the public life of the community, such as street photographs or local celebrations. Other photos might include those of community organizations or institutions. If you can help, please contact USM Professor Maureen Elgersman Lee at (207) 780-5239 or e-mail her at elgersma@usm.maine.edu; the fax number is (207) 780-5571.

Fall Semester 1999

Fall 1999 Course: HTY 141

African American History to 1865

Mondays and Wednesdays
11:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m.
Portland campus.

This course explores the beginning of African American history from its beginnings in the American colonies through the end of the Civil War. It is open to all students regardless of major and may, for this academic year, be used as a substitute for HTY 131—U.S. History to 1877. For details, contact Professor Maureen Elgersman Lee at (207) 780-5239.

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