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The Black Church

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THE GRIOT



Preserving
African American
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

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From the Editor's Desk

When I first moved to Maine in 1997, I took an apartment on Portland's Munjoy Hill. I soon fell in love with the Eastern Promenade and the redemptive power of its views of blue wash. There were many evenings that I came home, fatigued from teaching and research, and felt my spirit bolstered by a quick detour along the water. Many also were the mornings that the glassy, indigo image of Casco Bay reflected in my rear view mirror and washed over me in a simple prayer: "Surely God is here."



Maureen Elgersman Lee

Equally as powerful as the sensation of nature, however, was the feeling that I was living in the presence of

history. Coming to realize and appreciate the presence of historic places like the Eastern Cemetery, the Abyssinian Church, and Green Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church, I always felt linked to the past—a past of which I was no longer a teacher, but a student. In the rituals of life and death, of worship, sacrament, and burial, surely God was there.

In keeping with the Convocation theme of "Religion and the Human Experience," this edition of the *Griot* examines the sustaining power of the African American church in Maine in its progression "from anchor to beacon."

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

A Place in Time: The Black Church: From Anchor to Beacon

Well before Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in late 18th-century Philadelphia, the church—in its various forms—was an important mainstay for African Americans throughout the country. From clandestine camp meetings to white-regulated attendance in makeshift sanctuaries, the church has played important roles in the lives of African Americans. As a uniquely Black-directed institution, the church has historically been called on to serve the religious, educational, political, and economic needs of its members, as it was frequently the only place that African Americans could gather without being supervised or relegated to a subordinate position. The study of churches in Maine is a microcosm for the study of the relationship between African Americans and the church in the United States. Of particular interest are Portland's Abyssinian Church, one of the oldest African American meeting houses in the country, and Green Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church, its institutional successor.

As outlined in the celebrated documentary, "Anchor of the Soul," Portland's Abyssinian Church is the institution that

grounded and held fast the city's African American population for almost a century, from its opening in 1828. Serving in its institutional flexibility as both a house of worship and a school, the building and its congregation also supported a temperance movement and anti-slavery activism. The church was also a sustaining force in the face of discrimination and the *de facto* segregation that surfaced in Portland as early as the 1830s. But the church struggled with its spiritually rich yet financially modest populace. Despite the generous contributions of members like Reuben Ruby, a Gray-born Mainer and self-made man, and even in the face of some 'philanthropic' contributions from some local white churches, the Abyssinian was not able to sustain itself financially. In an almost symbiotic relationship, the sale of the Abyssinian church, which closed in 1917, aided in the building of the A.M.E. Church. In the early years of this century, many members of the Abyssinian had already begun migrating from Newbury Street to the A.M.E. Zion Church on Sheridan Street. And thus the torch was passed.

Green Memorial A.M.E. Zion church, so renamed in honor of one of its most dedicated members, Moses Green, has indeed picked up where the Abyssinian left off. In its early years it struggled with lim-

ited finances and a small, African American congregation in ways similar to that of the Abyssinian. At the same time it maintained a spirit of perseverance and resourcefulness that still drives it today. By the mid-20th century, Green Memorial still carried forward the mandate of anchor it had inherited from its mother institution, the Abyssinian. It took on a more public role in the 1960s and 1970s as civil rights issues came to the foray in Portland, across the state, and across the country. Green Memorial was preparing to step into a leadership position for people of color, and into a diplomatic position among local churches of various denominations. In this transition, Green Memorial moved from anchor to beacon, helping to create a vision of and path for racial reconciliation.

Green Memorial pastor, Rev. Margaret Lawson, believes that her congregation has reached an important historical juncture, and remains in a unique position to be a beacon of Christian love and social healing as younger, local families continue to seek out the church—families that have in some cases been marginalized because of their interracial compositions.

The historical and institutional evolutions of the Abyssinian Church and Green Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church in Portland are inextricably intertwined, with the end of the former having been the begin-

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A Place in Time

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The Abyssinian Church today.

Photograph. Shoshana Hoose collection. African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library.

ning of the latter. In the near future, the two will coexist where they could not afford to before. It is clear that the relationship between the Abyssinian and Green Memorial is coming full circle, as the Committee to Restore the Abyssinian, a body of local historians, concerned citizens, and financial leaders, moves ever forward in its goal to restore the institution to its rightful place in history. The first step in the restoration was to have control over the building, and the Committee recently purchased the Abyssinian from the city of Portland. The ultimate goal is to have the Abyssinian restored to its former likeness

and to have it serve as a community and cultural center, standing as a beacon in illuminating the history of African Americans in Portland and forging relationships among people across the state.

In places where there was no identifiably Black or predominately Black church, African Americans attended places of worship according to their own Protestant or Catholic denominational affiliations. The city of Bangor hosted a relatively large African American population from the late 1800s to the mid 1900s, and Blacks attended various houses of worship, including Columbia Street Baptist Church, Grace Methodist Episcopal, Ohio Street Evangelical Covenant Church, and St. John's Episcopal Church. Receptions varied from warm to decidedly cold. Some Black members ignored prejudice while some moved to congregations where they felt accepted and could be more active in matters from teaching Sunday School to board memberships. Ultimately, the church is a reflection of the larger social patterns that exist beyond its walls, and as social tensions eased outside the church, tension often eased within the church. As one Bangor resident recalls about her more than 40 years of service to the church, "[T]his is what I enjoyed and this is what kept me right on struggling: by being in the church."

Bibliography

"Anchor of the Soul." Directed by Shoshana Hoose and Karine Odlin. VHS. 60 minutes.

Interview with Dorothy R. Simmons. 29 October 1999. Bangor, Maine. Interview by author.

Interview with Sterling Dymond, Jr. 30 October 1999. Bangor, Maine. Interview by author.

Calendar – Spring 2000

February 14 to 18: Dr. Traci C. West, assistant professor of ethics and African American studies at Drew University Theological School in Madison, New Jersey, will be at USM. West is the author of *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*, and as a Women's Studies visiting scholar, she will be giving various lectures and symposiums on subjects related to her research. For more information contact Women's Studies at (207) 780-4289.

March 9: One of the highlights of the 1999-2000 Convocation year will be an address by feminist, cultural critic, and renowned professor bell hooks. "Is God Love?" is the title of her talk; 7:30 p.m. in Sullivan Gym, Portland. Free and open to the public. For more information contact the History Department at (207) 780-5320 or 780-5239.

April 29 and 30: The annual conference of the New England American Studies Association (NEASA) will be held on USM's Portland campus. The theme of this year's conference will be "Unmasking Ethnic New Englands," and will deal with "the many ways that ethnic identities have been invented, constructed, hidden, and preserved."

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