

Summer 2002

Portland Area Oral History - James Mathews - Lucille Young - June McKenzie

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THE **GRIOT**

Preserving African American History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

**Volume 5, Issue 3
Summer 2002**

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.

Calendar of Events

Fall Semester 2002: HTY 341 Black Women in the Americas

This course explores the history of Black women in the United States, Canada, Barbados, and Jamaica. Topics include slavery, productive and reproductive labor, and migration. The course will emphasize the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Tuesday evenings, 4:10- 6:40 p.m., Portland campus. For more information, call Professor Maureen Elgersman Lee at (207) 780-5239 or email at Elgersma@usm.maine.edu.

"Africana Women in Maine" Conference

Organized by the African American Archives of Maine, this one-day conference on September 20, 2002 brings together scholars from across the state of Maine to present current or recent work on women of African descent in the United States, Canada, Africa, and the Caribbean. The day will begin with a keynote address, followed by panels throughout the day. The conference, held at Luther Bonney Hall, is free and open to the public, but registration will be necessary. More specific information will be found in the next edition of the *Griot*.

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From the Editor's Desk



Maureen Elgersman Lee

We have just completed a very successful academic year, highlighted by the Gloria S. Duclos Convocation events under the theme "Diaspora: Meanings of Home." My spirits are contented by the accomplishments of the past year, lifted by the promise of summer respite, and encouraged by plans for the coming months. In September exciting things will take place inside and outside the classroom, including "Africana Women in Maine," the first conference by the African American Archives of Maine. The "Home Is Where I Make It" exhibit originally planned for the spring semester will

take place in the fall. Look for more information to follow in the next edition of the *Griot*.

The previous two editions of the *Griot* have introduced readers to 6 of the 10 participants in the "Home Is Where I Make It: Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine" oral history project.* This edition will introduce some of the Portland and South Portland area participants. A learning experience on many different levels, this project is helping to forward the African American Archives' mission to collect, preserve, and disseminate information on the history of African Americans in the state of Maine.

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

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**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.*

A PLACE IN TIME:

James Mathews "To Me, There's No Place Like Maine."

James Mathews is a native Mainer. Born in Portland's General Hospital (now Maine Medical Center), part of Mathews' family tree has roots in Nova Scotia, Canada. Like many men of his day, Mathews' father traveled between Boston and Portland working for the railroad. His mother, Llewena Hill, was one of the early graduates of Gorham Normal School, but her desire to become a school teacher was made difficult by the practice (of the day) of not hiring Black teachers in Maine.

After graduating with honors from South Portland High School, Mathews went on to earn an associate's degree in electronics at Southern Maine Vocational & Technical Institute (now Southern Maine Technical College). Like other participants in this project, Mathews faced discrimination in employment. As a teenager, he worked for a Portland retailer for approximately four years, but left his position on principle:

I remember I had a problem because at the time minimum wage went up to a dollar, and they refused to give it to me because I was a high school student[.] And when I was going to graduate, they were willing to put me on full-time and give me a dollar, and I refused to work for them. I figured if they didn't think I was worth a dollar when I worked hard for them, . . . I didn't want to work for them.

After working for a local lumber company and for the Portland cleaning company, Kippy's Service, Mathews settled into 37 years of work

in the telephone industry for New England Telephone and American Telegraph and Telephone (AT&T).

While citing the local leadership of the Reverend Margaret Lawson (Green Memorial AME Zion Church), Reverend Steve Coleman (Williams Temple Church of God in Christ), and current NAACP President Neville Knowles, Mathews himself has been an important force in the Portland area community. A former president of the NAACP's Portland chapter, Mathews is a trustee board member of Green Memorial, president of the lay council, and member of both the men's choir and the mass choir. Clearly cognizant of the changing face of the Portland area community, Mathews' position is that "although we all, you know, we have different faiths, I believe the Christian aspect of our faiths is more telling."

Mathews is not shy about expressing his feelings about Maine:

Well, I happen to believe that Maine is a great place to live. I've enjoyed visiting other cities and other states and so on, but to me there's no place like Maine. . . . I like the four seasons. I like snow, except for when I have to shovel it. . . . I haven't found anywhere else where I would really want to live . . . at this time.

[From: Interview with James Mathews, 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:

Lucille Young "I'm Educated with God-given Sense."

As a native of Jackson, Miss., Lucille (Davis) Young spent her early life working on a farm where picking cotton and taking care of livestock were a matter of routine. Jackson was also in an area where the predominance of the sharecropping economy made its presence felt in local education for people of color:

We got very little schooling. You had to go [to school] whenever you could because most of the time you had to work in the fields. So I got into the 10th grade, but I never finished it.

Young married, had eight children, and became a widow. She left Mississippi. As she relates, she took the \$10 she had in her pocket and, with her ingenuity and the goodwill of people known and unknown, brought her family to Maine. The move was clearly a leap of faith, but Lucille Young is a woman of great faith.

Coming to Maine was a challenge for me because I didn't now where I was going. I cried all the way to Maine. . . . I said 'Lord, have mercy. Wherever we go, let us all be together.' I'd never been out of Mississippi. But it was good for me, too, and I'm glad I made the choice to come to Maine.

After some disappointments in the local job market, Young secured a position at South Portland's Fairchild Semiconductor, where she would work for the next 20 years. And while Young's childhood circumstances did not allow the completion of high school, her wisdom and strength have defied the social constraints placed on her as a woman and as a person of color. Young admits freely:

Now I'm not educated with books, but I'm educated with God-given sense. . . . God gave me that. . . . and I don't try to make out like I've got such an education because I don't have that. But you know what? I'm who I am and that's what I want to be. . . . Everywhere I go I have respect from people because I treat people the way I want to be treated.

When asked what contributions she had made to her community, Young could only answer, "My time." For a woman who is known for opening her arms and her home to children in need, for helping out at her church, for holding a seat on the board of the Portland Housing Authority, and for just doing things for others—her time has done much to change people's lives. For this and other things, Young received the NAACP's Martin Luther King, Jr. Award for her spirit of service. Although initially shocked at being chosen, Young admits, "I was happy to get it."

[From: Interview with Lucille Young, 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:

June McKenzie "I Think It's Important That I Participate."

Born one of 12 children, June (Williams) McKenzie has lived all of her life in Maine. Her maternal grandparents were Annie and George Eastman, part of a well-known Portland family who owned a barber shop on Fore Street. Her father, a Tuskegee graduate, was a truck driver and was someone who clearly impacted her cultural perspective.

He'd make us read poetry and read about Black historians and about Black history. . . . My father said, 'Be proud of who you are.' That was our guideline. And even before the 'Black is Beautiful' thing came out, my father told us, 'Just be proud of who you are.'

McKenzie graduated from Portland High School where she was captain of the badminton and basketball teams. She later attended both Northeastern Business College and the American Institute of Banking. After several jobs that included work in a fish factory, a sewing factory, and running a department store elevator, McKenzie took a position with Portland Savings Bank, now People's Heritage Bank. She worked there for more than 20 years.

McKenzie's love of learning seems to have been a recipe for family success. Most of her children are working on or have already earned graduate degrees. Her grandchildren seem to continue the tradition of academic excellence, as one grandson was recently inducted into the National Honor Society and another into the National Junior Honor Society.

A highly active member of the Portland community and of her church, Green Memorial, June McKenzie is a study in activism. Former head of the church's missionary board, a member of two choirs, and a church trustee, McKenzie is also a former secretary, treasurer, and vice-president of the NAACP's Portland chapter. She remains ever convinced of the importance of civic participation, especially for African Americans:

I've been to several NAACP conventions, and worked for the New England convention, New England region. So that's an ongoing thing. It's too bad that more Blacks don't join because they never call the NAACP until they get into trouble. And it makes a big difference. . . . But we really need help because the membership fee went up to \$30, and everybody says, 'Why should I pay \$30?' But they pay \$30 for every other thing. . . . and it's critical that we keep this civil rights group alive.

June McKenzie has a modest view of her role in the local community. She describes herself as "just a mother and a person that's interested in everybody's welfare." A strong spokesperson for motherhood and activism, McKenzie explains her position quite succinctly:

Blacks are like every other person: they want the best for their children, they want a good home to live in, they want good schools, and they want their children to be treated fairly. And that's my goal in life—to keep on fighting until things are right.

[From: Interview with June McKenzie, May 23, 2001, Portland, Maine. "Home Is Where I Make It" Project, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine.]