

Fall 2002

## Portland Area Oral History - Richard Tarrence

Maureen Elgersman - Lee (ed.)  
*University of Southern Maine*

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# THE GRIOT

## Preserving African American History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

Volume 6, Issue 1  
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### 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

#### Africana Women in Maine Conference

Friday, September 20, 2002  
Luther Bonney Auditorium,  
USM Portland campus

*Sponsored by Maine Humanities Council, Maine  
Women's Fund, and the University of Southern Maine*

See the back of this newsletter for information

#### "Home Is Where I Make It": African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine

The exhibit of the "Home Is Where I Make It" oral history project will open in October. Check your mail for notification of the specific date, time, and place.

Look to the next *Griot* for information about the January 2003 exhibit co-sponsored by the African American Archives of Maine called "Scandalous Eyes." It deals with Black representations in late 19th and early 20th century sheet music covers.

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### From the Editor's Desk



Maureen Elgersman Lee

No rest for the weary. No rest for the wicked. Because I can never remember which is the correct saying, I can never remember whether I am supposed to claim weariness or wickedness in my fatigue. Weary or wicked, I did not get the respite I alluded to in the last issue of the *Griot*, but I had a great, adventurous summer. And now I look forward to a new semester and a new academic year filled with the activity of classes, conferences, and exhibits.

I have always been someone who looks forward to the start of a new school year: the comfort of cooler weather, the anticipation of turning leaves, the purchase of new clothes. Aesthetics aside, the begin-

ning of the academic year marks a return to structure. I look forward to the routine of classes, office hours, and even department meetings. I also like the fall for the same reasons that I like to travel: the possibility of reinventing myself and the realization that no matter how much I map out the journey ahead, surprises surely await me.

This issue of the *Griot* profiles the last interviewee in the "Home Is Where I Make It": African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine" oral history project. Expect to receive invitations to the October exhibit opening in the near future. Also, if you have not received information about the African American Archives' inaugural conference, Africana Women in Maine, see the Calendar of Events.

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

### A PLACE IN TIME

#### Richard Tarrence:

#### "They Made Me Know That I Could Make It Here"

A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Richard Tarrence moved to Maine in 1975. Something of a renaissance man, he is a Vietnam air force veteran, businessman, father, church leader, stage actor, and, most important, a University of Southern Maine graduate. Richard Tarrence's own personal profile is very engaging, and his observations about the African American community in southern Maine are very firm and insightful.

Reflecting on his arrival in Maine more than 25 years ago, Tarrence recalls a "pretty difficult adjustment period," magnified by the absence of personal comforts like easy access to barbers or having common meeting places.

"The difference I saw immediately was that there was not one whole Black community, per se; we were intertwined in a larger community. . . . And I had a difficult adjustment time with that."

But Tarrence saw through the fragmentation to the activism and support:

"One of the people I respected dearly when I first came here was [Gerald Talbot]. The work he did, and some of the people [who] picked up the mantle after him. And that made me proud. That made me know that I could live here because there was a community here. . . . That made me know that I could make it here."

And while Tarrence recognizes a distinct difference between living in Maine and living in Ohio, he also applauds those Blacks in the local area who have made places for themselves in Maine, either as natives or as transplants.

"I think I've known a lot of people—a lot of Blacks—who have come and gone in Maine in the time that I've been here. . . . I think that Blacks that

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African American Archives of Maine  
University of Southern Maine  
P.O. Box 9301  
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live here, who have a solid base, that stay here are very unique. I think they're very unique."

Richard Tarrence is not someone given to living life in a vacuum. As a father, he has not had that philosophy and as a singer and actor, his artistic passions do not lend themselves to isolation. Tarrence describes himself as a gregarious person who often ministers through song:

"I sing everywhere. I [sang] at the Seeds of Peace last summer, and I think those were kids from all over the world. And sometimes I see their faces and it looks like they're very proud of that....And I hope that's how I contribute. That's my ministry—singing."

It is clear that Richard Tarrence's heart is very much with the children and young adults of the community, and that he is very aware that he serves as their example in even the most simple of ways:

"But sometimes when young people come up to me on the street and they know me, Mr. Tarrence, maybe that's some influence there. I just hope that... just by being an active member that they see me in those positions, and that contributes something to making them a little more—feeling a little more needed, valued in the community."

[From "Home Is Where I Make It": African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine" Oral History Collection. African American Archives of Maine, May 17, 2002, Portland, Maine.]

## Africana Women in Maine Conference

Friday, September 20, 2002  
Luther Bonney Auditorium, USM Portland Campus

### Schedule:

- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| 8:00-9:00 a.m.      | <b>Registrant check in</b>  |
| 9:00-10:15 a.m.     | <b>Keynote address:</b> Lorraine Johnson-Coleman, award-winning author of <i>Just Plain Folks</i><br><b>Theme:</b> African-American Women and the Making of U.S. History  |
| 10:15-10:45 a.m.    | <b>Lorraine Johnson-Coleman book signing</b>  |
| 11:00 a.m.-noon     |   |
| Panel 1:            | <b>African-American Women</b><br>Prof. John J. Zaborney, University of Maine at Presque Isle<br>Prof. Melinda Plastas, Bowdoin College  |
| 12:15-1:20 p.m.     | <b>Lunch**</b>  |
| 1:30 p.m.-2:30 p.m. |   |
| Panel 2:            | <b>African Women</b><br>Prof. Randolph Stakeman, Bowdoin College<br>Prof. Kathleen Wininger, University of Southern Maine   |
| 2:45-3:45 p.m.      |   |
| Panel 3:            | <b>Africana Women in Canada, the Caribbean, and Maine*</b><br>Prof. Maureen Elgersman Lee, University of Southern Maine<br>Gerald E. Talbot, Visible Black History<br>*African American Archives of Maine panel |
| 4:00 p.m.           | <b>Wrap up comments</b>   |

This conference is free and open to the public. Space is limited.  
**Register by phone at (207) 780-5239, TTY (207) 780-5646 or by e-mail at [elgersma@usm.maine.edu](mailto:elgersma@usm.maine.edu).**

Those in need of accommodation must make this request by September 9, 2002.

\*\* Attendees are free to bring their lunches or to purchase them at nearby restaurants. Persons interested in pre-ordering and pre-purchasing box lunches should contact Maureen Elgersman Lee by September 12, 2002. Please note that because USM parking is extremely limited, attendees are encouraged to car pool or take public transportation.

Sponsored by Maine Humanities Council, Maine Women's Fund, and the University of Southern Maine