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Women of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)

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African American Collection 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.

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Please note that the African American Collection of Maine is located on the second floor of the Gorham library until the renovations to the Portland library are finished.

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From the Editor's Desk

The phrase "random acts of kindness" has become relatively common in American popular culture, with books, movies, Web sites, foundations, and bumper stickers all extolling the virtues of individual acts of selflessness. As commonplace as the phrase may have become, the kindness of strangers should not be dismissed as trivial or inconsequential, especially as it concerns the creation and preservation of institutions. In this case, it would be fair to say that the African American Collection of Maine relies on the kindness of strangers.



Maureen Elgersman Lee

As editor of the *Griot*, I believe in strangers to welcome this newsletter into their homes, offices, and institutions. As faculty scholar for the Collection, I rely on strangers to not remain strangers, but to become partners in the intellectual life of the Collection by making use of its materials and by attending Collection-sponsored programs.

Some events help illustrate the more tangible ways the African American Collection has benefitted from the kindness of strangers. In recent years, we received a large book donation from Maine bookseller Gary Woolson, and those books found homes in various parts of the University library. A donation of domestic notions was the basis for the creation of the

Lee Forest Collection, featured in the last edition of the *Griot*.

Recently, this same spirit of kindness and generosity brought to the African American Collection a donation of two embosser seals from Scarborough resident Stephen Flynn, of Flynn Construction. As Mr. Flynn recounted in February, he found the two seals several years ago in Old Orchard Beach. Not knowing the significance of his find until he used a piece of paper to create the imprints, Flynn decided to hold onto the seals until he found the right place for them. As our luck would have it, he had read a recent newspaper profile on the African American Collection of Maine and contacted us immediately.

The seals I write of are no ordinary seals; they are seals of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, Augusta, Maine (Klan No. 11) and Bath, Maine (Klan No. 15). This edition of the *Griot* offers readers a brief glimpse into the history of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) as it relates to Maine and to the organization as a national body. This issue also illustrates that the pursuit of history is often an uneasy one, and one in which traditional constructions of gender are often forced to give way to newly acquired evidence.

If you have a donation that you would like the African American Collection to consider, we would like to hear from you.

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

A PLACE IN TIME:

Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK)

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) was founded in the fall of 1921, six years after the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was reorganized in Stone Mountain, Georgia. It was officially chartered in 1923. The WKKK headquarters were established in Little Rock, Arkansas.¹ Using the platform of 100% American women, those eligible for WKKK membership had to be female, white, Anglo, American-born, gentile citizens who were at least 18 years of age and who had no loyalty to foreign governments or sects.² Lest one be tempted to think of the WKKK as innocuous or less than serious in their objectives, the public was warned of the organization's venomous potential while plans for the creation of the WKKK were still being formalized. The *Ohio Union* warned explicitly in the summer of 1921:

Well may the colored citizen now prepare for serious trouble. 'The female of the species is more deadly than the male.' . . . Wise Colored people will make all the legal preparations for protection at once.³

The *New York Times* was one of the more visible, national newspapers to report on

the early history of the WKKK. In September of 1921, the *Times* reported the New York City visit of KKK 'empress' Elizabeth Tyler, who announced the Klan's plans to indoctrinate women:

The plans for the women's organization have not yet been completed, but I do know that we will naturalize a class of 500 of the most prominent women from every section of the country. The naturalization ceremony will take place at the Imperial Palace in Atlanta about Nov. 1 . . . Yes, indeed, there will be . . . women prominent socially, but I am not at liberty to disclose their names. One of the requirements of our order is that the lists of members shall be kept secret.⁴

Two days later, the *Times* reported on Tyler's continued stay in New York City and her alleged reception of more than 800 letters of inquiry from women throughout New York state. Tyler emphasized that the WKKK was not an auxiliary, and the

newspaper quoted her as saying:

At my suggestion the women's organization will be on a par with that of the men. We plan that all women who join us shall have equal rights with the men. This women's division now in process or organization will not be in any sense a dependent auxiliary of the Ku Klux Klan. It will be a separate organization, but, of course, will be bound to the parent organization.

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan represent a fascinating yet disturbing study of women's organization and power in the 1920s. Although the balance of information about the WKKK deals with its activities in states like Indiana and Ohio, emerging WKKK materials link Maine to the organization's headquarters and force a rethinking of women's history and Maine's history.

tion. Yes, the women's organization will have the same ritual and the same costumes.⁵

The initial, charter members of the WKKK are said to have numbered 125,000; by the mid 1920s, WKKK membership is said to have reached half a million and to have had established chapters in at least 36

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states. WKKK 'Klonvocations' (annual conventions) were held in 1923 and in 1926, and the 1927 Klonvocation is said to have been attended by delegates from every state in the country.⁶ If this statement is accurate, then Maine would have been one of the states represented at that gathering. The WKKK went into serious decline by the late 1920s and apparently was never able to recover its former membership base.⁷



Seals of the WKKK of Augusta and Bath, ca. 1923-1928

The history of the WKKK in Maine is not as historiographically accessible as that of Maine's KKK.⁸ Very little documentary evidence of the WKKK in Maine exists, but the WKKK seals advance the understanding of the organization on the material level. The two seals of the WKKK of Augusta (Klan No. 11) and Bath (Klan No. 15) each weigh slightly more than 3 pounds; they measure 8 inches tall (from base to lever tip), 5 inches long, and 2 inches wide. The imprints have a diameter of 1¾ inches. The Augusta and Bath seals use the same formula as the seal of the WKKK's national headquarters.⁹ In addition to bearing, in the outer circle, the words "Women of the Ku Klux Klan" and the locale of the particular Klan, the inner circle bears the image of a woman holding a sword and a shield. On the shield one finds a cross and the letters W, K, K, K, at the top, bottom, and sides of the cross. Rather than seeing Maine as the exception in WKKK activity, the seals force the realization that Maine was in line with the national body. Unless there was an underground movement that allowed the WKKK in Maine to thrive after the 1920s, the seals are likely datable to 1923-1928.

But without the benefit of documents, what can the seals possibly reveal about these two organizations and their members? The seals reveal that the women were probably highly invested in their organization, and although the \$10 membership fee was not completely cost prohibitive, several members were probably drawn from the

middle class. The capital location of Augusta's WKKK chapter, known as the Capital City Klan, serves to speak to the political significance of the WKKK. The WKKK was founded soon after the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment awarded universal adult suffrage to women and allowed women more political power than at any other point in the country's history until then. In addition to voting along lines of 100% Americanism, WKKK women have been characterized as a 'poison squad of whispering women' who spread gossip about Jews, Catholics, and Blacks, with economic and political results that were "enormously and disastrously successful."¹⁰

A newspaper retrospective on the KKK in Maine does place the Klan in Bath in 1924 as host to a state-wide Klan clam bake. This same retrospective places a women's auxiliary in Bath, but notes that the auxiliary's organization was unsatisfactory to the national headquarters, who claimed that the necessary proportion of the initiation fees had not been forwarded to them.¹¹ An October 1994 article in the *Maine Sunday Telegram* places women as highly visible participants in a Klan parade in Dexter in the 1920s and reports that a women's auxiliary, the Klaxima, was formed in Portland. The Klaxima and other such women's auxiliaries may have been comparable to the WKKK, but accounts contemporary to the WKKK's formation and more current research have considered them organizationally distinct from one another.¹²

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan represents a fascinating yet disturbing study of women's organization and power in the 1920s. Although the balance of information about the WKKK deals with its activities in states like Indiana and Ohio, emerging WKKK materials link Maine to the organization's headquarters and force a rethinking of women's history and Maine's history. It even lends credence to the saying, "As goes Maine, so goes the nation."

Notes

¹ One of the most critical and revealing studies remains Kathleen M. Blee's *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Blee's study focuses on the Women of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, but offers historical insight

into the development of the WKKK and critical analysis of the organization's meaning.

² Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 28.

³ "Women Admitted: Ku Klux Klan Changes Constitution," *Ohio Union*, 20 August 1921. Ohio Historical Society online, <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam>.

⁴ "Ku Klux 'Empress' Comes Here To Shop-Tells of Plans to Naturalize 500 Prominent Women, Some From New York," *New York Times*, 11 September 1921, 22.

⁵ "Says Women Here Flock to Join Klan-'First Lady' of Ku Klux So Busy Answering Inquiries She Has to Employ Aid," *New York Times*, 13 September 1921, 5.

⁶ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 2, 29, 31; "Ex-Sheriff on Trial in Bastrop Klan Case-Defends 'Women of Klan,'" *New York Times*, 7 November 1923, 15.

⁷ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 175-180.

⁸ During the early 1920s, when the WKKK was being organized and chartered, local and national newspapers documented the KKK presence in Maine. *The Bangor Daily News* published accounts of Klan solicitations for meeting space there and Portland city politics bore the imprint of the Ku Klux Klan in 1923. In 1925, KKK Klan No. 46 was established for Androscoggin County, and the charter located it in Auburn. See KKK Charter, Gerald E. Talbot Collection, AACM. Much of the critical work on the Klan in Maine has been in theses. They include Lawrence Wayne Moores, Jr., "The History of the Ku Klux Klan in Maine, 1922-1931," M.A. Thesis, University of Maine, 1950; Edward Bonner Whitney, "The KKK in Maine, 1922-1928," B.S. thesis, Harvard College, 1966; Rita Mae Breton, "Red Scare: A Study of Maine Nativism, 1919-1925," M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1972.

⁹ See, for example, American Radicalism > Ku Klux Klan > "Women of America: The Past! The Present! The Future!," at Michigan State University Library online. [Http://digital.lib.msu.edu/onlinecolls](http://digital.lib.msu.edu/onlinecolls)

¹⁰ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 123, 148-153.

¹¹ William Langley, "Maine in the Days of the Klan," *Maine Sunday Telegram*, 2 February 1969, 5D.

¹² Shoshana Hoose, "Klan has sorry history in Maine," *Maine Sunday Telegram*, 30 October 1994, 1A, 11A.