

Winter 2004

## Lewiston/Auburn Oral History - Wahidah Muhammad - Neville Knowles - Emma Jackson

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

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### African American Collection of Maine

*During 2003-2004, the African American Collection, part of the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity, will prepare to relocate to the USM Glickman Family Library in Portland. During this time, use of the Collection will be by appointment only.*

#### Collection Contacts

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**Correction:** The fall 2003 issue of the *Griot* reported that Margaret Nichols's father, Lewis Garfield Nichols, had worked at the DeWitt Hotel. Actually, Lewis Garfield Nichols worked as a caretaker for Dr. Remwick, a local surgeon. Extra copies of the *Griot* carried the correction, but the initial mailing did not. The *Griot* apologizes for this error.



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### From the Editor's Desk



Maureen Elgersman Lee

When I first moved to Maine in 1997, "Never stand still" was a popular television advertising slogan. I thought it was fantastic, adopted it as my personal mantra, and lived by it that first year. I was teaching new students and creating new courses, getting my feet wet in the African American Collection at USM, starting the *Griot*, and traveling to Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia for research and lectures. Now, after more than six years at USM, I have discovered a saying popular among the faculty: "Sabbatical is a good thing." Heeding these wise

words, I will be on sabbatical during the spring 2004 semester.

During this time, the *Griot* will remain on its regular publication schedule and the "Home Is Where I Make It: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine" text and photograph exhibit will open in Lewiston in February. (See Calendar of Events for details.) This edition of the *Griot* profiles three more participants in the "Home Is Where I Make It" oral history project: Neville Knowles, Emma Jackson, and Wahidah Muhammad. The next issue of the *Griot* will profile the remaining participants, and offer a brief sketch of the project's findings.

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

### Wahidah Muhammad: "It's not totally about race, it's also about economics."

Wahidah Muhammad was born in Chicago, Illinois, the daughter of Annie Bell Williams and Christopher Columbus Williams. Muhammad's father worked most of his adult life as a barber. Her mother worked intermittently in a local factory. Muhammad recalls the physical toll of her mother's work:

"[W]hen she would come home, she would always have me to rub her back because her back hurt so bad....It was hard labor. Indeed. I remember very well her being just wiped out when she returned home."

Wahidah Muhammad has lived in Maine since 1991. In Chicago, she earned a nursing degree from Olive Harvey College. In slightly more than a decade of Maine residency, Wahidah Muhammad has earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Southern Maine, and, in 2003, she received a master's degree in social work from the University of New England. After spending more than 20 years as a registered nurse, Wahidah Muhammad is making a professional transition to social work.

Regarding the labor of Blacks in

Lewiston and Auburn, Muhammad, like Emma Jackson, points to a local tradition of hairdressing. In greater sum, however, Muhammad recognizes the entrepreneurial achievements of Lewiston's Somali residents who "are opening things right and left," including a restaurant and various grocery stores.

Muhammad's professional training and personal caring also give her critical insight into the economic realities of life for some of Maine's less fortunate:

"I would sit in [the] park sometimes and look at the people. I can only compare it to Chicago. Occasionally you would see a bag lady, what we call a bag lady....I could sit in [the] park [here] and see three or four people come through[.]...So it's not a race thing, it's an economic thing. And that really just opened my mind so that I could see better.... So, I have no doubt in my mind: it's not totally about race, it's also about economics."

[From: Interview with Wahidah Muhammad, 16 June, 2003, Lewiston, Maine; "Home Is Where I Make It: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine" Oral History Collection, African American Collection of Maine.]



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### A PLACE IN TIME:

## Neville Knowles: "There's no such thing as retirement in the Bahamian life."

Neville Knowles was born in Exuma, Bahamas, the son of Muriel Bullard Knowles and Joseph William Knowles. Muriel Knowles was an agricultural laborer and Joseph Knowles was a truck driver for a local company, General Hardware. Word of mouth in Exuma brought the prospect of employment in Maine, and "being the type of guy who likes to travel," Neville Knowles came to the United States with his first wife in the 1950s.

After a few years of domestic work for a Turner family, Knowles moved to Lewiston and took a job in the receiving room at the Shapiro Brothers shoe company. He recalls that Isaac Jackson was another African American who worked in the shoe factories of Lewiston and Auburn; Knowles is certain that there were others. In addition to the factory work, Knowles and his wife ran Miss Lee's Beauty Bar in Auburn for several years. Neville Knowles also worked for approximately 18 years at Maine Savings Bank before retiring in the early 1990s.

Because "there's no such thing as retirement in the Bahamian life," Neville Knowles soon became bored. He applied for a job in security at Bates College "as more or less, what you call a test case." The security position was taken, and Knowles's overqualification made it unlikely that he

would accept an opening as a custodian. However, Knowles did accept what he originally planned to be a one-year job and he has been at Bates College for almost 11 years.

In his reflections on Black life in Lewiston and Auburn, Knowles's most enduring memories surround founding the Central Maine Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1961. Having served as president of the Central Maine Branch, as president of the Portland Chapter, and as vice-president of the New England Region, Neville Knowles is highly esteemed for his NAACP leadership. Knowles's NAACP mentors included Thurgood Marshall, who was "1000% NAACP," and Roy Wilkins, who was, in Knowles's opinion, one of the NAACP's most astute leaders. Neville Knowles admits that he had difficulties with discrimination, but he "did not have a chip on [his] shoulder when [he] came here." He believed that if other people could live in Maine, so could he.

[From: Interview with Neville Knowles, 4 June, 2003, Lewiston, Maine; " 'Home Is Where I Make It': Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine" Oral History Collection, African American Collection of Maine.]

## Emma Jackson: "I worked in the nursing field. My husband worked in the shoe factory."

Emma Jackson was born in Atlanta, Georgia, the daughter of Leroy and Daisy Tillman. Before she married, Daisy Tillman attended Atlanta's Spelman College and was a schoolteacher. After she married, she worked as a domestic. Leroy Tillman

worked in maintenance for Western Auto for many years; after the company went out of business, he worked odd jobs.

Emma Jackson has lived in Maine for more than 46 years, and all but one of those years has been spent in Lewiston/

Auburn. During her first decade in Maine, Emma Jackson worked as a domestic, and for the past three decades she has worked in the nursing field. She began as a certified registered nursing assistant (CRNA) and went on to become a certified registered medication assistant (CRMA). She worked for the Pineland Center for eight years, and for more than 20 years at various sites affiliated with Central Maine Medical Center (CMMC).

For the first few months of their marriage, Jackson's husband, the late Reverend Isaac Jackson, worked for Kippy's, the Portland-based cleaning service owned by the Richardsons. After Kippy's, her husband worked in eight to ten different shoe factories in the area, including Norway Footwear and American Pride. Isaac Jackson spent approximately 25 years in the local shoe factories, working his way up from the lasting room to foreman. He left the shoe factory for a few years, but returned to the work until he retired.

Emma Jackson is a member of Auburn's Christ Temple Church of God in Christ (COGIC), where her husband was the pastor. In fact, it was Emma Jackson's uncle, Bishop Williams, who came to Maine and founded Williams Temple COGIC in Portland. She explains,

"[W]e came here with family. I came here with family. Years ago, that's the way a lot of people came to Maine."

[From: Interview with Emma Jackson, 30 April 2003, Auburn, Maine; " 'Home Is Where I Make It': Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine" Oral History Collection, African American Collection of Maine.]

## Calendar of Events

### " 'Home Is Where I Make It': Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine"

*Text and photograph exhibit based on African American oral histories*

**February 2-March 29, 2004**

**Hall Gallery, Lewiston-Auburn College**  
University of Southern Maine  
51 Westminster Street, Lewiston

### Opening Reception

Monday, February 2, 2004\*

*Program Honoring Participants: 7:00-7:30 p.m.*

*Reception and Viewing: 7:30-8:30 p.m.*

*Free and open to the public*

For information and access inquiries, call  
(207) 753-6500; TTY (207) 753-6511  
[www.usm.maine.edu/lac](http://www.usm.maine.edu/lac)

\*Snow date: February 9

Storm line: (207) 753-6595