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The Maxfield Family

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Preserving
African American
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

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African American Collection of Maine

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From the Editor's Desk



Maureen Elgersman Lee

How time has flown! It is already the fall of 2004, making the 2004-2005 academic year the *Griot's* eighth year in print. Not to be left out of the current make-over trend, the *Griot* is getting some freshening up. The feature known as a "A Place in Time" will continue to highlight materials from the African American Collection of Maine. In addition, each issue will review a book from the Collection and will keep readers abreast of some of the most recent publications in African American history and culture. This issue of the *Griot* begins unraveling the mystery of the Maxfield family and reviews a new novel.

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Book Review

Gary D. Schmidt. *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*. New York: Clarion Books, 2004. 219 pp.

Calvin College English Professor Gary Schmidt begins his latest novel by introducing the reader to Bostonian Turner Buckminster, who "had lived in Phippsburg, Maine, for almost six whole hours," and "didn't know how much longer he could stand it" (p. 1). The only son of Phippsburg's newest clergyman, Turner is more interested in lighting out for the Territories than becoming part of the new community. Under the watchful eye of widow Mrs. Cobb and routinely pummeled by the deacon's son, Willis Hurd, Turner finds nothing appealing about Maine. Until he meets Lizzie Bright. Thirteen-year-old Lizzie Bright Griffin grew up on Malaga Island, as had many generations of her family before her. She routinely rows her grandfather's dory between the island and the mainland; she goes clamming almost daily; she talks to and touches whales. According to her grandfather, also a minister, Lizzie is "the closest thing to glory he'll ever see on God's green earth" (p. 59).

Schmidt uses Turner's visit to Malaga to offer a dignified, reverent description of the island and its people:

"Together [Lizzie and Turner] climbed up to the center of the island, where the trees were thick and high. She showed him the graves, and they stood quietly together and were careful where they set their feet. Then back up the shore and to the south end of the island, where shingled one- and two-room houses clamped themselves to the rocks like oysters, glad to be there and not needing anyone's say-so" (p. 60).

In essence, *Lizzie Bright* is a fictionalized account of several concurrent conflicts. At the center of the novel are Phippsburg's religious and political leaders who seek to remove Malaga Island residents and raze their community in the name of economic development. The long-time residents of Malaga Island fight to retain their homes and their way of life in the midst of overt racism and characterization as squatters. Turner Buckminster has various battles of his own. He struggles, both physically and emotionally, to find his place in Phippsburg, while trying to convince the community, including his own father, not to disturb Malaga. Lizzie Bright and Turner Buckminster also go to lengths to maintain their friendship. Surprisingly, Mrs. Cobb, who began as Buckminster's nemesis, becomes his greatest ally. Reverend Buckminster ordered his son to play piano hymns for Mrs. Cobb each afternoon. Mrs. Cobb allows Lizzie to enjoy the music, although her place is on the floor at Cobb's feet.

Schmidt's novel turns on the tragic resolution of the Malaga question. The Island's residents are institutionalized. Phippsburg's tourist interests are protected, but its financial windfall does not materialize. There are no winners in this story; every major character in the novel loses someone or something dear.

One of Schmidt's most moving and well-crafted scenes comes at the end of the novel, as Turner experiences the bitter-sweet triumph of rowing the dory into deep water and touching a whale:

"With his hand still on the whale and the whale's eye on him, he wept. He wept for Old Mrs. Hurd, and he wept for Mrs. Cobb, and he wept for his father, and he wept for Lizzie Bright. . . . Then he remembered that she would never hear anything in this world again. So he had no one to tell of this thing most beautiful and most wonderful" (p. 217).

Although *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* is a youth novel, both the subject and the writing style make it suitable for adult readers. Gary Schmidt's work is literarily picturesque, historically rooted, and highly engaging. It is a sobering look into the moral dilemma of Malaga Island in 1911 and 1912, providing what the author calls the "backstory of Malaga" (p. 218). He invites his readers to contemplate his construction of the injustice that was Malaga Island.

Recent Publications

The following books were reviewed in recent issues of the *American Historical Review*, the journal of the American Historical Association (AHA). They may be of interest to readers of the *Griot*.

Ira Berlin. *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

Berlin follows five generations of enslaved African Americans, from what he calls the eighteenth-century "Charter" generation through the nineteenth-century "Freedom" generation.

Joyce A. Hanson. *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women's Political Activism*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

Hanson focuses on how Bethune valued Black women's social and political power. The biography explores Bethune's creation of the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls, her role in the National Association of Colored Women, and her founding of the National Council of Negro Women.

Marvin McAllister. *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African and American Theatre*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

McAllister studies William Brown's short-lived African Company (also the African Grove Theatre), located in New York City from 1821 to 1823.

Elizabeth McHenry. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

McHenry constructs a history of African American literacy from the 1830s through the 1920s by focusing on the associational lives of Black readers. The author diverts attention from the fact of Black literacy to its use in constructing Black social and political identity.

James M. O'Toole. *Passing For White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820-1920*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.

An account of Michael Healy and Eliza Clark's ten biracial children whose "ambiguous" skin color and features allowed them to pass for white. One of the Healy children, James Augustine, became the United States' first African American Catholic Bishop; his brother, Patrick, served as president of Georgetown University. A welcomed complement to Albert S. Foley's *Bishop Healy: Beloved Outcaste* (1954).

Nell Irvin Painter. *Southern History Across the Color Line*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

A collection of Painter's previously published essays on the American South from the antebellum period through the turn of the twentieth century. The collection reveals why Painter remains an important American historian.

Christopher Waldrep. *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Waldrep explores the history of lynching from its beginnings in revolution-era America through the 1998 murder of James Byrd, Jr., in Jasper, Texas. Waldrep explores the form, use, and discourse of lynching across the United States.

Peter Wallenstein. *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law—An American History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Wallenstein's text examines three hundred years of U.S. law and social history concerning interracial marriage.

He places particular emphasis on the one hundred years leading up to the *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) Supreme Court decision that allowed interracial marriage in all states, including the then sixteen states that prohibited it.

A Place in Time: The Maxfield Family

One of the most recent donations to the African American Collection of Maine is an arrangement of photographs (reproductions) of the Maxfield family. They were donated by Muriel Deering Christopher of Biddeford Pool; she had purchased the item at an Arundel flea market from a man who had bought it at auction in Biddeford. The arrangement features a total of fourteen extended family members: Mrs. Ella Woods, Mrs. E.A. Maxfield, and M.C. Maxfield and his children—Walter, Harriett, Lena, and Goneria. Also pictured are M.C. Maxfield's siblings: Mary, Elizabeth, Stafford, Herbert, Gatewood, Bolden, and Miles. The evidence may be lean, but research is helping to unravel the Maxfields' story.

The United States census locates at least some members of the Maxfield family in Hanover County, Virginia, just north of Richmond. Stafford Maxfield was born in Virginia in 1840, and was a farmer in 1880. His wife, Amanda, kept house and took care of their seven children: Mary, Lucy, Martha, William, Hattie, Miles, and Gertie. Another Maxfield family was headed by Hubert (also Hurbert) and Louisa Maxfield. During the 1870s, they had five children of their own: Lucy, Mary, Harriet, Clara, and Hurbert. By 1880,

Louisa Maxwell was widowed and parented her five children—aged one through ten years—on her own.

This is where the trail ends right now. It is difficult to find the Maxfields in Virginia

census records after 1880, and the family may have emigrated from the south during this era. Maine records locate various Maxfields in Maine—some with the same first names. However, they are identified as White, rather than Black. It is possible that some of the Maxfields that appear in Maine censuses had light complexions and were, therefore, misidentified by census takers. The 1880 manuscript census for Virginia identifies Louisa Maxfield and her children as "mulatto," an archaic term

indicating that they were bi-racial or that they simply had fair complexions.

According to the 1880 census, there was an African American with the Maxfield surname living in Maine. Machias-born Joseph Maxfield lived in Deering, Cumberland County. A brickyard laborer, Joseph Maxfield boarded with a local family. No documentation has been located, thus far, to link Joseph Maxfield with the Virginia Maxfields.

Clearly, more work will have to be done to solve the Maxfield family mystery; any future updates will be posted in the *Griot*.

