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A Place in Time: George Ross and Samuel Osborne

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African American Collection of Maine

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The African American Collection of Maine welcomes donations of materials on African American life in Maine.

The African American Collection of Maine is a member of the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine.

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From the Editor's Desk

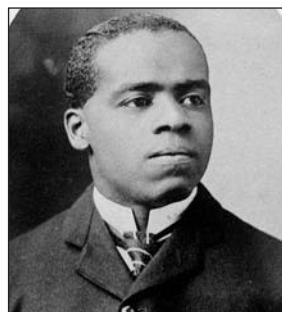
The start of a new academic year always seems to bring renewed energy and intellectual engagement. In keeping with those ideas, this issue of the *Griot* shines a light on Lewiston's George Ross and Waterville's Samuel Osborne, two Virginia-born men who will be featured in the African American Collection's 2008 annual exhibition. The *Griot* also reviews the *The Women Who Raised Me*, the recently published memoir of actress-activist Victoria Rowell, a Maine native and recent USM honorary degree recipient. *The Women Who Raised Me* is available in the USM Portland campus bookstore.

—Maureen Elgersman Lee, associate professor of history and faculty scholar for the African American Collection of Maine at USM, is on academic leave for 2007-2008.



A Place in Time: George Ross and Samuel Osborne

Labor has long been the barometer of African Americans' status in society, both locally and nationally. Labor impacts all aspects of life, including housing, education, health care, and consumerism. And while it may not rival cities like Portland or even Bangor, the labor history of Black men in central Maine during the early to mid



George Ross, Bates class of 1904, courtesy The Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections, Bates College, Lewiston

1900s reveals some of the ways in which they have been valued, endearing members of their communities.

Prominent among the legends of Black labor in central Maine is the story of George Ross. A Virginia native, Ross graduated from Bates College in 1904. After graduation, he developed a local market niche by manufacturing and selling ice cream from his Elm Street resi-

dence. As the Maine taste for ice cream was seemingly well pronounced already by the 1930s, Ross's business was frequented by Bates students and local residents alike.

Held in high esteem in Waterville history is Colby College janitor, Samuel Osborne. Sources indicate that Osborne was born into slavery in Virginia in the 1830s, and that he was later liberated by the Union Army and brought to Waterville by Colby alumnus Colonel Stephen Fletcher. Osborne spent 37 years as a janitor at Colby before his death in 1904. More than a mere custodian, he was a mentor to hundreds of Colby students who annually addressed the graduating class during commencement celebrations. Samuel Osborne, his wife, Maria, and their children—two of whom attended Colby—all left indelible imprints on central Maine history.

[Information provided by the Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections, Bates College, Lewiston; and Colby College Special Collections, Waterville.]

On the Bookshelf

The Women Who Raised Me: A Memoir

By Victoria Rowell

Victoria Rowell relates in her recently published memoir, *The Women Who Raised Me* (William Morrow/Harper Collins), her recollection of a fourth-grade incident at St. Patrick's Grammar School in Roxbury, Massachusetts. While serving detention for whispering in English class, Rowell weighed the options of waiting to be dismissed against being able to catch the last bus to her thrice weekly class at the Cambridge School of Ballet. Rowell writes that as she moved to leave the classroom,

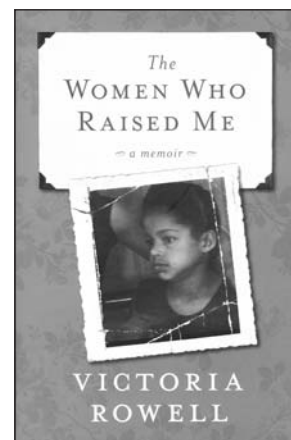
Suddenly [the nun] ran toward me and I picked up my pace, racing down the hall. Terrified, I outpaced her, running down the stairs, taking two steps at a time. Becoming winded, the red-faced nun stopped and leaned over the banister, screaming at me as I dashed toward the exit.

SISTER: Why can't you be like all the other girls?

ME: Because I'm not! (132-33)

No truer words were spoken, for the story of Victoria Rowell's life thus far is unlike any you have read or are likely to read in a very long time.

Millions of people, both nationally and internationally, are familiar with the range of Rowell's work on daytime television



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Calendar of Events

“Remember Me?” The Life and Legacy of Jean Byers Sampson

Sampson Center annual exhibition
October 15, 2007-January 18, 2008,
Special Collections, Glickman Family Library, USM Portland campus
Opening reception and award gala: October 15, 2007, 5:30-7:30 p.m.
Abramson Community Education Center, USM Portland campus

In the Center of It All: Glimpses of African American Life in Central Maine

The African American Collection of Maine's 2008 annual exhibition
February 1-April 15, 2008
Opening reception: February 1, 2008, Exhibition preview: 4-5 p.m., Reception and program: 5-7 p.m.
Glickman Family Library, USM Portland campus

For information and access inquiries call (207) 780-4275

Victoria Rowell *continued*

(*The Young and the Restless*), on primetime television (*Diagnosis Murder*), and in feature films (including the recent *Home of the Brave*). Many know that she can add world-class ballerina and model to her credits as well. What fewer people have known, until now, are Rowell's experiences as a foster child and her subsequent advocacy for foster and adopted children.

Soon after her birth in Portland's Mercy Hospital, Rowell entered the foster care system and came under the care of her first foster mother, Bertha Taylor, of Gray. However, Maine state policy did not favor the fostering or adoption of Black children by White parents. Despite intense lobbying by the Taylors and the Gray community to change the laws that stood in the way of Rowell's adoption, Rowell was relocated to a Black family shortly after her second birthday. Clearly, Bertha Taylor intended that she would remain connected to the baby girl she so loved. After Taylor's death, Rowell received a small ring box from one of Bertha's best friends, another of the many women who had mothered her.

Upon receiving [the box] I closed my eyes, feeling the soft warmth of Laura's hands over mine, and paused before lifting the lid, wondering what it could be....Finally I clicked open the box. Inside, as though it was the entire ocean preserved in the most miniature of seashells, was my earliest child-

hood, wholly captured in a saved lock of my hair—a single tiny perfect curl (38).

Rowell's long-term foster mother—the woman she called “Ma”—was Agatha Armstead. Armstead owned a sprawling West Lebanon farm known as Forest Edge, and it was here that Armstead nurtured Rowell and taught her many things, including the rewards of hard work, a respect for nature, and the joy of giving. It was also Armstead who discovered and helped cultivate Victoria Rowell's talent for classical ballet. It was this training that opened the world up to Rowell and led her on the path to becoming a world-class dancer, turned model, actress, activist, and writer.

There are too many poignant moments in Rowell's memoir to detail here. By her own account, she wrote *The Women Who Raised Me* to honor the many women who have shaped her life. Victoria Rowell's memoir celebrates motherhood, sisterhood, and womanhood—and all the ups and downs that can come with them. The book is courageous and honest, heartbreaking and triumphant. It has a poetic style that draws the reader into very personal conversations—conversations that, despite the book's more than three hundred pages, seem to end much too soon.

In Review

The following books were recently reviewed in the *Journal of African American History* and may be of interest to readers of the *Griot*.

—
Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll. “*To Love the Wind and the Rain*”: *African Americans and Environmental History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.

[Reviewed by Sylvia Hood Washington, University of Illinois at Chicago]

Authors/editors Glave and Stoll have compiled a fourteen-essay collection that traces the environmental experiences, ethos, and activism of African Americans from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries. The essays argue, among other things, that Blacks were engaged in environmental justice long before the civil rights movement.

—
Orleck, Annelise. *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005.

[Reviewed by Rhonda Williams, Case Western Reserve University]

Orleck uses a historical narrative to tell the story of Ruby Duncan and other women activists whose pre-Nevada migratory experiences gave them the courage to take on powerful Las Vegas money interests in search of better institutional protections and services for the poor.