

Spring 2008

A Place in Time: Maria Osborne and Her Daughters, Waterville

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Recommended Citation

Elgersman - Lee (ed.), Maureen, "A Place in Time: Maria Osborne and Her Daughters, Waterville" (2008).
The Griot. 19.
<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/griot/19>

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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.

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From the Editor's Desk

When I created the *Griot* newsletter in early 1998, I wanted it to be an ambassador of the African American Collection of Maine, with broad appeal to those both inside and outside the academic community. It has clearly evolved since its first issue, and I believe it has achieved its goal many times over. This will be my last issue as newsletter editor and as the Collection's faculty scholar.

If you will indulge me, I would like to use my last issue to acknowledge various individuals' and departments' support of my work. First, I wish to thank Richard Pattenaude, Joseph Wood, Mark Lapping, Kathleen Roberts, Nolan Thompson, Devinder Malhotra, Judy Tizon, and David Nutty for providing financial support, encouragement, and consistent presence at Collection events. I thank Leigh Raposo, Judie O'Malley, Bob Caswell, and staff for producing top-quality print materials and for actively marketing the Collection. There is not enough space here to thank individual faculty members, but I am indebted to members of my home department, the History department, as well as to those in women's studies, American and New England studies, geography and anthropology, English, Honors, philosophy, sociology, and the College of Education and Human Development. Of course, I wish to acknowledge Susie Bock, Abraham Peck, and Howard Solomon as colleagues in the goals of the Sampson Center and also recognize the unsung heroes of Special Collections—David Andreasen, Jenifer Hughes, and Kristin Morris.



—Maureen Elgersman Lee, *associate professor of history and faculty scholar for the African American Collection of Maine at USM*

I thank the community for coming out in support of the Collection, particularly members of the Green Memorial AME Zion, Williams Temple COGIC, and Christ Temple COGIC congregations. I greatly appreciate the professional relationships I have had with members of the Maine Humanities Council, the Maine Historical Society, the Bangor Museum and Center for History, the Maine State Archives/Library, and the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. Finally, I thank Gerald and Anita Talbot and Leonard and Mary Jane Cummings for their friendship over the years.

In Memoriam: Earl R. Johnson (1910-2007)

A few years ago, I was a guest columnist for the *Portland Press Herald*. In that column, I used a visit to a man in Bangor to introduce the idea that history can be seen as a collection of stories told of the nobility of everyday living, a history that comes through contact with great people. The man I visited and used to frame that article was Earl Johnson. Mr. Johnson and I met when I began researching my book, *Black Bangor*, and we stayed in touch over the years.

Earl Johnson was born in Bangor in February 1910, to William A. Johnson and Edith Delaney Johnson. He resided

and worked in Bangor, and lived out his days in the Kossuth Street home his father built. Johnson was a friend to many and known for his love of family, music, radios, and boats.

One of the Collection's most important moments was a few years ago when Earl Johnson, his daughter, son-in-law, and extended family members came to the USM Glickman Family Library for the opening reception of the Sampson Center's "The Ties That Bind" exhibition on the histories of select Maine families. Johnson's family was featured in the exhibition and he was visibly moved

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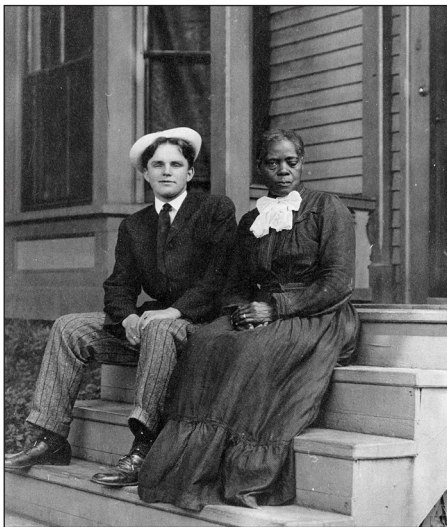
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A Place in Time: Maria Osborne and Her Daughters, Waterville

Continuing the focus on African Americans in Central Maine, this issue of the *Griot* highlights the women of the Osborne family. Although often overshadowed by the history of her husband, Samuel, and her son, Edward, Maria Osborne's story is engaging, as are



Maria Osborne and Colby College student, Ash Street, Waterville, ca. 1910.

Courtesy Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine.

those of her daughters. Born in Virginia in the mid 1830s, Maria Iveson seemed destined to marry Samuel Osborne, her childhood playmate and fellow slave. After becoming husband and wife, the peculiar institution still forced them to move around Virginia. After the Civil War, the Osbornes

migrated to Maine, but in staggered fashion: Samuel arrived in Maine in 1865 and Maria, reportedly, came a year later.¹

Jumping ahead some years, the 1880 federal census records the Osbornes living in Waterville. Samuel Osborne was a janitor at Colby College and Maria Osborne kept house. In addition to son, Edward, five daughters are listed in the Ash Street household: Flora, 26; Amelia, 22; Annie, 11; Alice, 8; Marion, 1.

According to the census, both Flora and Amelia were born in Virginia; Annie, Alice, and Marion were Maine natives.²

If Samuel Osborne made Colby College a nurturing place, then Maria Osborne made their home equally so. She has been described as having “absolute supremacy in every department of culinary achievement.”³ This photograph of Maria Osborne and a Colby student, however, is a study in contrasts—race, class, gender, age, past, and future. The other Osborne women led unique lives, lives that also intersected with Colby College. Amelia Osborne, for example, became a Colby College dorm mother and Marion graduated from Colby in 1900.⁴

There is more to learn about the Osborne women, and due diligence to their histories will mean scouring a wide variety of sources. To have a complete, balanced understanding of the Osborne family's place in the histories of both Colby College and the Waterville community, it is essential to shine the light on its women.

Notes

1. Frederick Morgan Padelford, *Samuel Osborne, Janitor* (Boston: L. Phillips, 1913), 4-9.
2. 1880 Federal Census, Waterville, Kennebec, Maine.
3. Padelford, *Samuel Osborne*, 33.
4. H.H. Price and Gerald E. Talbot, *Maine's Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People* (Gardiner: Tilbury House, 2006), 29; *Colby College Oracle*, 1900, 31, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine.

In Memoriam *continued*

to see family images on display. Already well into his 90s, Johnson was a vision of pride and strength. It seemed then, as it did just a short time before his death, that he would certainly live to see his 100th birthday, as had some of his older siblings.

Earl Johnson was a friend to me and to the African American Collection of Maine. The details of preparing to go on leave caused me to delay another visit to Bangor, and I regret that I was not able to sit and talk with him one more time. I am grateful for the chance to pay my final respects, and I end this tribute to Earl Johnson the same way I finished that newspaper column. Good night, friend. It was my pleasure to see you.

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