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## AA MS 05 Cummings Guest House Register Finding Aid

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**CUMMINGS GUEST HOUSE REGISTER  
AA MS 5**

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**By  
Karin A. France**

**Portland, Maine  
April 2010**

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## **Administrative Information**

**Provenance:** The Cummings Guest House Register belonged to the Cummings Guest House, in operation in Old Orchard Beach ME from 1923 into the 1990s. It was purchased by the University of Southern Maine's Glickman Library, with some assistance from Philip Grime, in 2008.

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**Cite as:** Cummings Guest House Register, African American Collection of Maine, Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine, University of Southern Maine Libraries.

## **Historical Sketch**

The Cummings Guest House was located at 110 Portland Avenue, Old Orchard Beach, ME. In 1917, Rosvell "Rose" (Emerson) Cummings, originally from the South, had moved to Maine from Massachusetts with her husband, Charles Edward Cummings, Jr., who worked for 50 years as a porter at Portland's Union Station. Rose owned and managed the guest house (with help from her seven children, all of whom she sent to college), beginning operations in 1923. After her death in 1959, her children (primarily E. Emerson Cummings, a graduate of Bates College who was a math teacher in Old Orchard Beach known for developing a new math curriculum, as well as having served on the Town Council) continued to operate the guest house until 1993, with the only major change in operations being that they stopped serving meals at the house in the mid-1960s. (Rose had been known as an excellent cook, and had provided meals for the guests at the house).

The Cummings family remodeled their farmhouse into a guest house in order to serve African American travelers visiting the area who had limited options for places to stay because of their race. Old Orchard Beach was an extremely popular seaside resort town beginning in 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>, with particular fame in the 1920s and 1930s. Its pier and boardwalk were home to many attractions, such as hotels, eating establishments, amusements, and, of course, the beach itself. Although there were many places to stay in the area, de facto segregation made it difficult for African Americans to find establishments at which they were welcome guests, making a guest house like that of the Cummings family an important addition to the community/tourist industry.

Patrons ranged from chauffeurs and maids on vacation to writers and academics, doctors, teachers, laborers, and famous musicians who played at the Casino, a nightclub in Old Orchard Beach. Many guests returned year after year and became close friends with the family. The family knew most of their guests, or received new

visitors based on recommendations from those that they did know; reservations were required. The guest house was not listed alongside other Old Orchard Beach hostleries. Rather, they depended on word of mouth amongst African American tourists. Travelling as an African American was not always easy, and people often had to depend on recommendations of others in order to find establishments that would welcome them along the road.

Some of the well-known personalities who stayed at the guest house have already been identified in the register. Musician and band leader Duke Ellington visited in August 1935 (with his son Mercer and his wife, who signed in on her own at other points, as well, including August 1934, July 1935, and July 1936 (this last as Mrs. Mildred Ellington)). Ellington reportedly admired the voice of one of Rose's children, Ann Cummings (Searcy), and invited her to sing with him. Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen stayed in July 1940, and he later dedicated a children's story to Pumpkin Cummings, the cat of Ann Cummings (Searcy). Saxophonist and Ellington band member Harry Carney and/or his wife Dorthea (Dorothy) signed in on multiple occasions – June 1935, July 1936, August 1938, July 1939, August 1944, July 1945, June 1948, August 1949, August 1951, August 1952, June 1954, and July 1968. The Cab Calloway Orchestra stayed in July 1944 and Mrs. Lionel Hampton, wife of jazz musician Lionel Hampton, registered in August 1944.<sup>1</sup> The Cummings family has indicated that there were other famous visitors, including jazz musician and bandleader Count Basie, singer Ella Fitzgerald, activist W.E.B. DuBois, and historian John Hope Franklin; these names have yet to be clearly identified in the register. In addition, no signatures have been officially authenticated, and some may not be the signature of the well-known person him or herself, but rather represent a spouse, traveling companion, or guest house staff member signing in on his or her behalf.

On July 28, 2004, the Cummings Guest House was added to the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its significant historical role, particularly as relates to African American history, and because of the well-known figures who sometimes stayed there. A number of years after closing, the family sold the property to Dr. Elena Tilly of Washington D.C., whose family had been frequent guests during her youth.

Information for this history was gathered from the following sources, copies of which are in the collection file/Special Collections:

Bouchard, Kelley. "Guestbook holds memories of black travelers' haven." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, August 24, 2008, A5-A6.

Grime, Philip, e-mail message to Susie Bock, April 18, 2008.

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<sup>1</sup> These dates may not represent every visit of these famous personages, as an exhaustive search has not been completed; further inspection of the register might reveal more examples of such signatures.

Kimball, Mike. "Lest We Forget Rockrest and The Cummings Home." *Memories Maine: Southern Maine Edition* (Spring 2009): 17-18 and 22.

National Register of Historic Places, Cummings' Guest House, Old Orchard Beach, York County, Maine, Record Number 352391.

Price, H.H. and Gerald E. Talbot. *Maine's Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People*. (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House Publishers, 2006).

Wack, Kevin. "A Home's Heyday; An Old Orchard Beach house where black entertainers once stayed is now a historical site and set for renovation." *Portland Press Herald*, August 23, 2004, B1.

These sources also contain further details about the Cummings Guest House that might be of interest to researchers.

### **Description of the Register**

The Cummings Guest House Register documents the names, home addresses, and dates of visitation of guests at the Cummings Guest House from 1923 to 1993, as visitors signed in themselves or were signed in by a traveling companion or staff member. Names are listed sometimes individually, one name to a line, and sometimes by couple or family group. Addresses vary from simply city, to city (or town) and state, to full street addresses. Dates seem to be primarily the date when the guest signed in, but, especially in later years, guests sometimes entered dates of both arrival and departure, as well as, occasionally, specific times of day. Although the ledger has a column for room number, this was not often filled in, except occasionally during the later years. The register has 182 pages and 3,000-3,500 signed entries, which are almost all written in ink, although there are some entries in pencil.

The information in the guest book reveals that most guests came from Boston, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and New York City, particularly from Brooklyn and Harlem, as well as from cities and towns in the greater metropolitan areas around these major urban centers, such as Cambridge and Roxbury, MA. Guests also hailed from locations further afield, including Charleston, SC; Chicago, IL, Detroit, MI; Durham, NC; Jefferson City, MO; Little Rock, AR; Montreal, Canada; and Oakland, CA, to name a few examples.

The register indicates that the guest house was predominantly open only in the summer months of June to September, with occasional fall listings. The guest house closed in 1943 presumably due to World War II and a resulting downturn in business, but reopened again in 1944.

Numerous names appear regularly over many years. For instance, Eugene and Leah Nicols of New York City began visiting in 1934 and continued to do so nearly every year

until the guest house's closing, often noting how many years they had been visiting when they signed the register (for instance in 1983, they wrote that it was their 50<sup>th</sup> year). Gene Nicols' last year, his 52<sup>nd</sup>, was in 1985; Leah Nicols noted in the guestbook in 1986 that her husband had passed away in December 1985 at age 99. Her name appears in the register through 1993, when the guest house closed. Nesta and Charles Purvis often appear to have visited at the same time as the Nicols.

In addition to the regular records of the guest house, the register also includes some additional listings. In between the records for the 1959 and 1960 seasons, there is a listing of family attendees at "Thanksgiving 1939 Winchester, Mass." In 1981, there is a list of names under the heading of "Birthday Party 8/15/81." In 1986, there is a listing of attendees at "Williams Family Reunion July 5, 1986." In 1991, there is a list of names under "Cummings Reunion 1991." At the end of the guest book, there are two names listed in August 1994 (probably family) and three names listed in July 1998 under the heading "Visitors to Maud Smith at Old Orchard Beach."