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Lee Forest Collection

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

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THE GRIOT

Preserving
African American
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

Volume 6, Issue 2
Winter/Spring 2003

African American Collection of Maine

Public Hours

Tuesday: 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.,
1:30-4:45 p.m.

Wednesday: 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.;
1:30-4:45 p.m.

Collection Contacts

Maureen Elgersman Lee, faculty scholar
(207) 780-5239

Susie Bock, head of special collections,
director of the Sampson Center,
University archivist
(207) 780-4269

David Andreasen, archives assistant
(207) 780-5492

Please note that the African American
Collection of Maine is located on the second
floor of the Gorham library until the renova-
tions to the Portland library are finished.

Calendar of Events

Scandalous Eyes: African America in Illustrated Sheet Music Covers, 1895-1925

Area Gallery, Woodbury Campus Center,
USM Portland campus
January 28-April 1, 2003

This exhibit features more than 70 illustrated
sheet music covers belonging to local collector
Sam Carner. Curated by Carolyn Eyler,
USM Art Gallery; Frank Carner, English;
Donna Cassidy, American and New England
Studies/Art; Kathleen Winingier, Philosophy/
Art; J. Mark Searce, Music; Nolan Thomp-
son, Campus Diversity and Equity; Maureen
Elgersman Lee, History/African American
Collection of Maine. The Marlon Riggs video,
Ethnic Notions, will be playing throughout the
day in the Area Gallery amphitheater while the
"Scandalous Eyes" exhibit is on display.

Home Is Where I Make It: African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine

Fourth floor, Glickman Family Library,
USM Portland campus
February 1- May 31, 2003

This exhibit highlights the sense of community,
familial traditions, and activism of 10 African
Americans from Portland, South Portland and
Gorham. It is the product of a grant funded by
the University of Maine System in conjunction
with the Maine Humanities Council.

From the Editor's Desk



Maureen Elgersman Lee

What a whirl-
wind of a
semester the fall
was! A new
school year, new
students, and
new events. I am
happy to report
that September's
"Africana
Women in
Maine" confer-
ence was an intellectual and social success,
and that in November the "Home Is
Where I Make It" exhibit opened at
Portland City Hall with a well-received
program and strong public support. The
momentum continues this winter/spring as
the "Home" exhibit is reinstalled in the
Glickman Family Library and as the
"Scandalous Eyes" exhibit is installed in
the Area Gallery of the Woodbury Campus

Center. See Calendar of Events for details
concerning these exhibits.

On a different note, the African
American Archives of Maine is now the
African American Collection of Maine.
The name change brings the Collection in
line with theory and practices that govern
special collections protocols. The switch
from "Archives" to "Collection" in no way,
however, changes the character, content, or
purpose of the Collection or of the *Griot*.
This issue of the *Griot* newsletter highlights
findings of the Portland phase of the
"Home Is Where I Make It" project and
introduces readers to the Lee Forest
Collection, one of the more recent
additions to the African American
Collection of Maine.

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

A PLACE IN TIME:

The Lee Forest Collection

The Lee Forest Collection is named for
University of Southern Maine staff
member Lee Forest, director of environ-
mental services, who donated a
variety of household notions,
including cookie jars and salt and
pepper shakers, to the African
American Collection. As the late
Barbara Christian related in the
Marlon Riggs video, *Ethnic
Notions*, domestic
notions like jars, shakers,
clocks, and ashtrays are
not just notions of the
home, but manifestations
of some of the most gut-
level feelings about race in
the United States.
Whether rendered in print,
in film, or in visual objects,
images of the mammy,
sambo, coon, and
picaninny are designed to
be laughable and
entertaining, but they
are not necessarily
considered inaccurate in

assigning traits like thievery, laziness,
ugliness, and ignorance to Black Ameri-
cans.

What then is the value of such aspects
of American material culture? Material
culture is, among other things, evi-
dence of a society's values, aesthetics,
preoccupations, and even its contra-
dictions. Aunt Jemima (mammy)
cookie jars, for example, reveal
how comfortable a society, or
a certain segment thereof, is
with racist constructions of
Black women. These same
images may also act as sources
of comfort—ways of seeing and
organizing the world in such a
way that one feels powerful,
comfortable, superior, enter-
tained, or secure—in a
changing world. Other
objects or illustrations that
depict Black men as inher-
ently dangerous and
dishonest "coons" help one
understand how public



Aunt Jemima figurine, Lee Forest
Collection

continued

African American Collection of Maine
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Whether rendered in print, in film, or in visual objects, images of the mammy, sambo, coon, and picaninny are designed to be laughable and entertaining, but they are not necessarily considered inaccurate in assigning traits like thievery, laziness, ugliness, and ignorance to Black Americans.

continued

policy surrounding the treatment of Black males has taken its cues, at least in part, from this racial mythology.

The Lee Forest Collection also complements components of the Gerald E. Talbot Collection including a tube of “Darkie Toothpaste” and the Gollywog trademarked by the British condiment company, Robertsons, as the advertising centerpiece for their orange marmalade. The Forest Collection also helps document America’s fascination with and attraction to racist memorabilia even as people across the country, as in Maine, struggle to disassociate themselves from it.

Note: To find out more on this topic, consult the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia component of the Ferris State Museum Web site. It is an extensive, brilliantly colored site created by sociology professor David Pilgrim. The address is www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm.

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Home Is Where I Make It: Project Findings

Data collection for the project, “Home Is Where I Make It: African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine,” has been completed. The pool of interviewees consisted of ten local African Americans, and while this represents an admittedly small sampling of people, the activities and impact of the participants far outweigh their numbers.

Some statistical information helps bring the project into focus. Forty percent of project participants were born in Maine. Of the 60 percent who were born outside of Maine, half were born in the northern states of Illinois, Ohio, and New York and the other half were born in the southern states of Texas and Mississippi. Eighty percent of the project participants had at least some degree of post-secondary education. When broken down along gender lines, 100 percent of the men had at least some post-secondary education compared to the women’s 60 percent. When it comes to military service, 8 percent of the men interviewed mentioned having served in the military, and while none of the women had military service, 40 percent of them mentioned having married a man who was in the military or affiliated with the military. These findings are engaging, but with such a small sample group, it is impossible to generalize these findings or proportions to the larger African American population of the Portland area.

Despite differences in migration and education, all of the interviewees were able to talk about distinct familial practices that they continued and had passed on to their children. Maintaining family reunions was

high on the list of traditions continued by the project participants. Some reunions were local, but most reunions were out of state, requiring those from the Portland area to travel to Ohio, New York, and Texas, but also to other countries including Canada, Jamaica, and Antigua. In the area of community relationships, most participants felt part of the local Black community, even while admitting that its relatively small, scattered population presented challenges to cohesion and social intimacy.

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There is no significant correlation, however, between ideas of Black community membership and activism. All of the ten persons interviewed for the “Home” project identified ways in which they have had an impact on the Portland area. From membership in local interest groups to leadership in larger, more recognized organizations like the Lions Club and the NAACP, all interviewees had engaged in some level of social involvement. Several participants could talk about both formal and informal ways in which they helped others. They read to shut-ins, mentored high school students, led Cub Scouts, took in motherless children, and advocated for health care improvements. Additionally, the vast majority of those interviewed mentioned either Green Memorial AME Zion Church or Williams Temple Church of God in Christ as an institution that figured in their sense of community or their activism, reinforcing the institutional significance of the Black Church even in places where Blacks represent just a fraction of the overall population.