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WILLIAM BURNEY AND JOHN JENKINS: A TALE OF MAINE'S TWO AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAYORS

ELWOOD WATSON

William Burney and John Jenkins were, respectively, mayors of Augusta and Lewiston. While this in itself is not unusual, the fact that they were African-American city leaders in a state where African-Americans make up less than one percent of the population is quite distinctive. Burney was elected mayor of Augusta in 1988, and Jenkins mayor of Lewiston in 1993. The article discusses their childhood and teenage years, their coming of age in college, and their early careers in the private sector. It suggests that these formative experiences, particularly their religious upbringing and their relation to white peers, was important in to their political success. Elwood Watson is assistant professor of American history and assistant director of the University Honors Program at East Tennessee State University. His work on the black experience in America has appeared in Perspectives: The Newsletter of the AHA; The Journal Of Black Studies, The Journal Of Religious Thought, USA Magazine, and in other publications. He received a Ph.D. in American history from the University of Maine in 1999.

THE YEARS after World War II brought dramatic demographic changes in American cities, as tens of thousands of African Americans left the South for better employment and educational opportunities in the North and West.¹ Crowded into ghettos and subject to continued discrimination, black people found far less than what they had hoped for in these northern cities, but the dynamic expansion of black urban life laid the groundwork for a vast change in late-twentieth-century urban politics.² Rooted in the postwar proliferation of black religious and civil-rights organizations, this change culminated in the election of black public officeholders in scores of cities throughout the nation.

The massive post-war migration from the rural South to the cities of



Although African-Americans make up less than one percent of the state's population, they led an active and effective state-level civil rights movement. African-Americans also administered two of Maine's largest cities: Augusta, where William Burney (above) was elected mayor in 1988; and Lewiston, where John Jenkins (pictured on p. 119) was elected in 1993. Their careers followed similar trajectories: In college both cultivated friendships across racial lines, and this experience proved important in their subsequent political successes. *James Clark Studio, Augusta.*

the North and West was the basis of black political development. The black migration began as early as Emancipation, and was punctuated by an increased flow during World War I. The influx of blacks into northern and western cities resulted in severe housing and job pressures and a wave of race riots in 1917-1919, most disastrously in Chicago and St. Louis. Migration slowed in the 1930s, but the need for industrial labor during World War II promoted a new exodus from the South. This wartime migration was as intense as that during World War I, and it led to similar hostile responses from whites. Northern New England was not totally exempt from racist discriminatory behavior.³

In the early 1960s, with national attention focused on the conflict over civil rights in the South, few whites were prepared to acknowledge that racial conditions in northern cities were deteriorating or that African-American patience with poor housing, inadequate schools, and high unemployment was reaching the breaking point. Riots in Philadelphia, New York, and Rochester in 1964 gave some indication of the trouble to come, but it was the massive racial disturbance that engulfed the Watts ghetto in Los Angeles for four days in August 1965 that sent the first clear message that African Americans were growing frustrated with politics as usual in city hall.⁴

In 1967, one year after radical and revolutionary African Americans began espousing Black Power, the nation witnessed a prime example of black engagement with mainstream politics as Richard G. Hatcher became the first African-American mayor of Gary, Indiana, and Carl B. Stokes became the first African-American mayor of Cleveland, Ohio. These electoral victories carried a double meaning. On one hand, they represented the culmination of one form of civil rights tactic—an effort to gain control of the highest governmental office in a particular locale. On the other hand, they signaled the beginnings of a new era in northern urban politics generally—an era of successful grass-roots coalition-building. By the early 1990s blacks had been elected in a number of cities: Newark (1970), Detroit, Atlanta, and Los Angeles (1973), Washington, D.C. and New Orleans (1977), Birmingham (1979), Chicago and Philadelphia (1983), Baltimore (1987), New York and Seattle (1989), and Denver (1991). Many smaller communities, especially in the South, also elected black mayors. By 1990, almost three hundred black mayors held office throughout the United States.⁵

Although black candidates benefitted from an increase in the black voter base, their election was far from a simple case of one racial group succeeding another through numerical dominance.⁶ Among major

cities, only Detroit, Atlanta, New Orleans, Baltimore, and Washington had black majorities when they first elected an African-American mayor. Even here black candidates needed a considerable number of white votes to win election. The clearest example of white support was the five-term election of Los Angeles mayor Thomas Bradley (1973-1993). Blacks comprised only about 17 percent of the population in Los Angeles. In addition to the black community, Bradley's coalition included white liberals and, to a lesser extent, Latino and Asian voters.⁷ Unfortunately, black political gains at the local level occurred during a period of reduced federal spending on domestic programs, which limited politicians' ability to respond to the needs of their often impoverished constituents. A lack of institutional and financial support, along with resistance from fiscally conservative business leaders, made it almost impossible for these mayors to achieve basic improvements in inner-city jobs and housing.

Although blacks comprised less than one percent of the Maine population, African Americans were politically active here as well. As early as the 1950s there were a few individuals, such as Portland activist Gerald Talbot and Bangor's Sterling Dymond, who were adamant in their efforts to promote black political and social equality in a state where very few people of African descent resided. Talbot became the first African American elected to the Maine House of Representatives. Another prominent black activist, Lewiston attorney Louis Scolnik, was appointed to the state Supreme Court in the 1970s. Dymond and Talbot, like hundreds of other black citizens in Maine, were involved in civil and human rights groups like the NAACP, the Maine Human Rights Commission, and the Penobscot Interracial Forum. As elsewhere, William Burney, elected mayor of Augusta in 1988, and John Jenkins, elected mayor of Lewiston in 1993, represented the culmination of a trend in African-American political development—in cities where blacks made up less than two percent of the population.⁸

Burney and Jenkins made history with their election victories. Both men won by a considerable margin and both earned the respect of citizens and fellow politicians across racial lines. Their elections testified to the rising tide of black political activism across the nation, and to the candidates' skill at reaching out across race lines.⁹

Winning Election

In November 1988, Augusta native William Burney, a two-term city councilor, handily won a four-way mayoral contest after a campaign largely free of racial or personal attacks. Burney's historic victory brought an outpouring of praise from commentators inside and outside Maine. The city's first black mayor—the first in any northern New England city—was sworn in on January 1989. Burney held the mayor's post for four consecutive two-year terms, during a period of steady economic growth and civic improvement.¹⁰ In November 1993, history repeated when Lewiston elected John Jenkins by a three-to-one margin. During his first two years as mayor, Jenkins, also a Democrat, garnered enormous confidence from Lewiston citizens. He parlayed this popularity into a successful run for the state Senate in 1996, defeating conservative Republican Paul Madore. Unlike the 1993 mayoral race, the contest for state Senate brought personal attacks and racial overtones from his opponent, but Jenkins won by a two-to-one margin, becoming the first black state senator in Maine's 176-year history.¹¹

A growth-oriented Democrat of the Edmund Muskie mold, Jenkins inherited a city in dire economic straits. On the skids since the deep textile depression of the 1950s, Lewiston was burdened by a sense of hopelessness, its downtown marred by dilapidated buildings and empty storefronts. By the late 1980s, Lewiston had earned a statewide reputation as an undesirable place to live, lacking in community spirit and distinguished only by its one intellectual beacon, the prestigious Bates College. One of Jenkins's major accomplishments as mayor was his success in attracting international business by capitalizing on Lewiston's French heritage. He also established a partnership with neighboring Auburn to cut expenses and improve services. Just as important, he reached out to young people and made them feel that they were a part of the city's political structure. Midway through Jenkins' second term, Lewiston's reputation began to change, and by the mid-1990s the economy was rebounding; unemployment was among the lowest in the state.¹² At Burney's departure from office in December 1997, Lewiston enjoyed one of the healthiest economies in Maine.

Unlike their black counterparts in larger cities, William Burney and John Jenkins were not faced with perennial inner-city issues like violent crime, black and Latino poverty, or racial division. Racial slurs emerged during Harold Washington's 1983 Chicago mayoral campaign, for instance, and the firebombing of a radical group called MOVE in Philadel-

phia during the tenure of African-American mayor Wilson Goode in 1985 suggests the social barriers most black mayors faced. In many large cities, African Americans historically competed with white ethnic and other minorities for access to jobs, schools, and social services. Whereas most black mayors presided over racially fragmented cities, Augusta and Lewiston were relatively free of conflict.

During their tenures, both men garnered statewide and even national media attention. Their victories brought comment from political think-tanks like the Joint Center For Political Studies, and *Newsweek* magazine ran a small article on Jenkins. Augusta's \$6 million beautification project was William Burney's most significant milestone, and John Jenkins's notable achievement was lobbying the Maine legislature to bring the French Forum Des Affairs project (FFA) to Lewiston. For these efforts, Jenkins earned the support of many Lewiston Franco-Americans. In 1991, Burney was elected as one of forty directors for the National League of Cities, serving as a consultant, along with other mayors, on urban problems. In September 1996, Jenkins was a recipient of an "Outstanding TRIO National Award."¹³

Personal Background

Successful black politicians like Jenkins and Burney drew from a deep well of African-American experience with urban community activities, interracial organizing, civil protest, and racially distinct social, cultural and religious institutions. Historically this combination of experiences provided a community of supporters, a sense of purpose, and a wealth of sophisticated tactical lessons for black leaders. The paths traveled by William Burney and John Jenkins demonstrate the importance of this legacy, and its role in shaping political careers for black urban politicians in the final decades of the twentieth century.

The church was by far the most important institutional support for African-American activism, connected as it was to politics, economics, social welfare, and women's activities. Because of the many dire conditions that plagued black neighborhoods over the centuries, the church was forced to take on a far broader range of functions than most white houses of worship. African-American religious institutions were crucial to mobilizing black political constituencies. In Chicago, black churches were a pivotal factor in Harold Washington's 1983 victory and in his reelection four years later. In New York City during the 1980s, a new gen-



John Jenkins, who grew up in Newark, New Jersey, benefitted from his mother's strong religious faith. Burney's parents were likewise active in the church, and both men saw religion as a central ingredient in their success. *Photo courtesy John Jenkins.*

eration of black clergy, influenced by black liberation theology, forged links with black secular organizations and political leaders. The church also smoothed the process of social adaptation when southern migrants arrived in the urban North during the postwar era.¹⁴ Both William Burney and John Jenkins credit religion and spirituality as pivotal factors in their own lives.

Burney's parents were part of the African-American Great Migration from the South in the early 1900s. Burney's father was originally from Macon, Georgia, and he migrated to Maine from upstate New York. Burney's mother, Helen, was a native of Virginia who also arrived in Maine

from New York State. They met in Maine in the mid-1930s; his mother, a renowned singer, worked for the Department of Labor and Statistical Analysis, and his father worked in a local paper mill. Both were active in issues of racial justice and members of the state NAACP. They were particularly concerned with the ecumenical aspects of the civil rights movement, and traveled to churches throughout Maine advocating equal rights for black citizens.

William Burney was born in Augusta on April 23, 1951. Shortly thereafter, his family moved to Litchfield, where they stayed until Burney was ten. Returning to Augusta, the Burneys became active in political and social affairs, gaining the respect of the town's citizens and subsequently smoothing the way for Burney's acceptance into Augusta's white society. In August 1965, Burney entered Coney High School in Augusta. The only black in the entire school, he managed to develop a close relationship with white students who, like him, were athletes. An honor-roll student, Burney earned the respect of his teachers. He described his teenage years as not much different from those of most adolescents—with all the usual conflicts. It was in his senior year in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, that Burney began to develop an awareness of the social activism around him.

In stark contrast, John Jenkins grew up in the black community in Newark, New Jersey. Born on May 29, 1952, he was the youngest of three children. His father physically abused his mother, and they divorced when Jenkins was seven years old. For twenty-three years, Mrs. Jenkins worked in a steam laundry to feed and clothe three children. To keep her son out of trouble, she enrolled him in karate school. Unlike rural Maine, urban New Jersey was plagued by crime, drugs, and gang violence. Jenkins was rescued from these tragic influences by a stellar educational experience and a firm religious faith, the latter a legacy of his mother, who was a strict Baptist. The Bible remained an important part of his life.¹⁵

In 1967, the summer of his sophomore year (and also the summer of the Newark and Detroit riots), Jenkins became involved with the American Friends Service Committee, a Philadelphia Quaker organization. Under this program, he spent a summer in Princeton University's Cooperative School Program (PCSP), designed to expose students from disadvantaged backgrounds to post-secondary education. The following year Jenkins participated in a similar academic program in Brandon, Vermont, and during that summer he worked for the Lowell, Massachusetts, Upward Bound Program with working-class blacks and Latinos. In

these two programs Jenkins was exposed to a variety of community and political activities and met people from various walks of life. His efforts won the admiration of Upward Bound administrators and made it possible for him to attend Bates College.¹⁶

During his senior year Jenkins met two black Bates College alumni from New York City. The two brothers, Nathaniel and David Boone, were respectively a lawyer and an entrepreneur. Radically different from the poor blacks Jenkins knew in New Jersey, these two successful individuals had an enormous impact on the teenager. They attended his athletic games, demonstrated a sincere interest in him, and convinced Jenkins to apply to Bates College. Shortly after meeting with the Dean of Admissions, he was granted admission.¹⁷

William Burney graduated from high school in 1969 and entered Boston University that fall; John Jenkins enrolled in Bates College in fall 1970. At the time, American campuses were hotbeds of political and social activism. Vietnam War protests were at their height, and the civil rights movement was moving in the direction of black separatism under leaders like H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael. The Boston University that William Burney attended was a social paradox. Students demonstrated for racial and social equality—and occasionally did battle with police—yet they maintained largely segregated lives. In his first year, Burney's social circle was mostly white. Later, he pledged a black fraternity and developed stronger ties with black students on the campus.¹⁸

Burney's experience with student politics at Boston University was formative. The university's large Jewish student population provided a basis for black and white collaboration on civil-rights issues, and Burney learned the lessons of interracial politics. By the time he arrived, however, this alliance had been overshadowed by the drive for black solidarity. Aggressive recruiting by universities in the Boston area drew large numbers of black students to campus and, in an era shortly after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., they were empowered to form close and often exclusive cultural identities, manifested in ethnic theme houses, black campus newspapers, black-sponsored campus cultural events, and related activities. At the same time, tensions in Boston, as in many large cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reached crisis proportions. These crises—bussing, housing, jobs—were etched in the minds of black students. As one of the few blacks with friends among both races, Burney prided himself on being able to serve as a sort of racial mediator.¹⁹

John Jenkins's experience at Bates was very different. Unlike Boston or Newark, Lewiston's black population was negligible. Most Bates students—both black and white—came from upper-middle or upper-class backgrounds. The product of a working-class Newark family, Jenkins was well aware of the economic disparity, and it had a profound impact on his college experience. To help himself through college, Jenkins put to use the athletic skills he had cultivated as a child: He opened a karate shop, giving lessons to children and adults.²⁰

Bates was an eye-opening experience for the young Jenkins. He quickly became aware of the division between privileged, largely suburban students and Lewiston's townsfolk, typically lower-income residents of French descent. The students were "Batesies," and the people off campus, "townies." The two groups held each other in mutual disdain. Bates's black population shared these social attitudes. Affluent blacks shunned Jenkins because of his working-class background and his politics. Many of them had grown up in predominately white, upper-class suburbs, and they saw Jenkins, a radical black from the inner city, as a threat to their values. For a young person like Jenkins, dedicated to racial solidarity, such reactions from fellow black students were painful indeed. Ironically, while many black students resisted Jenkins's progressive message, a number of whites supported him. With this support, and that of a few black students, the ever-idealistic Jenkins founded an Afro-American Society at Bates. Rocky relations with other black students enlightened Jenkins to the fact that the African-American community was not monolithic, and he learned to avoid automatic assumptions about people based on race. But the most significant lesson of his college years, as with William Burney, was the value of dialogue between races.²¹

After graduating from Boston University with a degree in public communications in 1973, Burney attended the University of Maine School of Law, from which he graduated in 1977. After abandoning the pursuit of a legal career, he returned to Boston to work for a real estate developer who created housing for low-income residents. Burney traveled up and down the East Coast serving low-income residents in cities such as Hartford, Washington, Baltimore, and Annapolis and learning the real-estate business. He returned to Augusta in 1984.²²

Jenkins earned a degree in psychology from Bates in 1974. Upon graduation, he pursued his interest in martial arts. Already skilled in Karate and Ju-Jitsu, he traveled all over the world and in 1977 won his first world championship in Japan. Future competitions earned him a total of four world championships in karate and one in ju-jitsu. While in

Japan, Jenkins developed enough fluency in Japanese to teach an occasional class.²³

Upon returning to the United States in fall 1977, Jenkins enrolled in Columbia University for a semester. The following summer, he enrolled in the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry. He stayed in the program for only one year, and in summer 1979 he returned to Lewiston to become Director of Housing at Bates College. He held this position from 1980 until 1982.²⁴

Politics and Race in Maine

Religion, racism, employment, and access to public facilities and education were the most pressing issues facing African-American politicians after World War II. Although the legacy of racism in Lewiston or Augusta was not as severe as it was in other American cities, William Burney and John Jenkins made important strides in bridging Maine's racial divide. Both developed close associations with whites and blacks during their college careers, and each gained from this experience the confidence to run for citywide office.²⁵ And in both cases, the legacy of working across race boundaries earned them the respect of their constituents. Both men experienced racial hostility from some quarters during their administration, and the occasional hate crimes against blacks, gays, Jews, and other minority groups reminded the mayors that racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia still existed in their largely homogeneous city.²⁶ Nevertheless, both were able to make progress against these and other obstacles, drawing upon their religious convictions, their professional guidance, and their family upbringing. Part of a broader development in black participation in mainstream urban politics, both men etched a permanent legacy in Maine's political history.

NOTES

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7. Raphael J. Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993). Washington, D.C. was already two-thirds Black at the time its first Black mayor, Walter Washington, was elected in his own right in 1974 after Congress enacted home-rule legislation.

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15. Burney Interview; Jenkins Interview.
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26. Burney interview; Jenkins interview.