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African-Americans and Maine

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FROM THE COLLECTIONS
AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND MAINE

On June 7, 1997, some thirty family researchers, students, and scholars met at the Maine Historical Society Library to share information about Maine African-American history. As part of the continuing dialogue, the MHS staff has begun organizing bibliographical material, clippings, and other information relating to that rich and complex subject. Located at the Library desk, this in-process collection is available to interested researchers.

Black men and women have made up a small but important element of down-east life since early colonial times. Unfortunately, articles about their contributions and life, such as Joseph Williamson's "Slavery in Maine" (*Collections of the MHS* 3 [1876]), are few. The more recent appearances of the video, *Anchor of the Soul*; the Portland newsletter, *The Bridge*; Bob Greene's genealogical magazine, *Family Affair*; the founding of the University of Southern Maine's African-American Archive by Gerald and Anita Talbot; Bowdoin College Professor Randolph Stakeman's studies, including "The Black Population in Maine, 1764-1900" (*New England Journal of Black Studies* [1989]); and essays in this quarterly by Charles L. Lumpkins and Eben Simmons Miller have begun to reverse this situation.

In the course of 176 years, the MHS Library has come to include a variety of manuscripts, books, photographs, and objects that document African-American individuals and groups. Some of this material is newly acquired, but a far greater amount is scattered through earlier holdings. For instance, the Andrew Hawes papers (Coll. 64) contain several slave documents. One dated December 27, 1759, blandly records the sale of a "negro man" named Scipio to a Falmouth man of affairs, Captain Moses Pearson. This information is rather easy to locate; other facts are buried deeper. In the account book of the privateer *Retrieve* (*Retrieve*), July 29, 1776 (Coll. 949, vol. 11a, ser. 2), is the notation, "to my Negro to bring Plank Down." This shows that the



This recent gift shows a family portrait taken in Houlton, Maine. According to the 1880 census, three African-American families were living in Houlton at about this time. The Cornelisons and the Talbots were business owners in Houlton, operating a barber shop there. Members of both families were also found in the 1900 city directory, although by 1901 the Talbot family appeared in the Bangor city directory. Gift of Glenn Skillin.

merchant and rebel leader Captain Joseph McLellan, Sr. employed or owned an African-American. Though the hated institution of slavery was abolished in 1783 in Massachusetts and the

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

District of Maine, miscegenation laws remained in Maine until 1883.

The Library preserves some of the records of Portland's famous Abyssinian Congregation Church (founded 1828) and a nineteenth-century drawing of the meeting house. There is also a rare first edition of Robert Benjamin Lewis's book, *Light and Truth* (Portland, 1836). This extraordinary volume by a black writer is believed to be the first Afro-centric history. Lewis, an inventor from Hallowell, died just before the Civil War, while attempting to settle fellow Africans in Haiti.

At present, only a fraction of the information relating to black down-easters has been identified, though the survey continued to find more. It is hoped that researchers will make use of these findings and add to our knowledge of a vibrant but little understood part of Maine's heritage.

William David Barry