

Maine History

Volume 36
Number 3 *Issues 3-4; Civil Rights in Maine,*
1945-1971

Article 2

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Lumpkins, Charles L.. "Civil-Rights Activism in Maine, 1945-1971." *Maine History* 36, 3 (1996): 70-85.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol36/iss3/2>

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CHARLES L. LUMPKINS

CIVIL-RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN MAINE, 1945-1971¹

Like civil-rights activists everywhere, those in Maine challenged racism and inequality in postwar America. Two factors – the size of the African-American minority in Maine, and the subtle but insidious forms of racism in the state – shaped NAACP strategies in Bangor, Lewiston, Brunswick, and Portland. Beginning with a small core group in the 1950s, the NAACP succeeded in building a basis for civil-rights legislation in Maine – a legacy, as Lumpkins points out – shared by all Mainers today. A native of Massachusetts, Mr. Lumpkins earned a M.L.S. from Simmons College in 1977 and a M.A. in history from the University of Maine in 1992. He is a candidate for the doctorate in American history at Pennsylvania State University, and a librarian and member of the faculty at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania.

Between 1945 and 1970 Maine civil-rights activists – both black and white – pushed for laws prohibiting racial discrimination. Their struggle was shaped by the subdued nature of racism in Maine. In a state where blacks formed only a tiny minority, racism was, in the words of black civil-rights leader Gerald Talbot, “very subtle...until it hits you in the face.”² This genteel version of racism had no overt, legal standing in Maine. Rather it took shape in the cumulative actions of many individuals and



With Portland's religious leadership well represented, civil-rights activists march down Congress Street in 1965. Gerald Talbot (front, far right in a light coat) became president of the NAACP's Portland branch in May 1964. *Courtesy of the African-American Archive of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library.*

local institutions.³ After years of exposing the adverse effects of this subtle racism on all Mainers, civil-rights activists finally won a commitment from the state in 1971 with the establishment of the Maine Human Rights Commission.

Although Maine's African-Americans enjoyed political rights as citizens and interacted with white Mainers at places of employment and institutions of learning, they were not truly integrated.⁴ Maine lacked a history of legalized segregation, but

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there were notable instances of discrimination and ethnic violence, principally leveled against Native Americans, Irish Catholics, French Canadians, and Jews. A powerful Nativist movement in the 1850s and the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s brought these tensions into the open.⁵ Black Mainers, dwelling primarily in the state's largest cities and towns, comprised less than one percent of the state's population. Between 1830 and 1950 the number of black Mainers increased from 1,000 and 2,000, while the population of white Mainers rose from 398,000 to 910,000.⁶ Although many blacks could trace their ancestry in Maine to the early or mid-1800s, they were unable to convert this longstanding residency into social equality. Racism in Maine was less restrictive than it was elsewhere, but black Mainers were constantly reminded of their second-class citizenship.⁷

During World War II, the state condoned racial segregation in the form of an all-black United Service Organization (USO). Although outright racial segregation on this order was uncommon, black Mainers faced other instances of discrimination. There were, black activist Mary Jane Cummings remembered, "two separate communities...in Portland."⁸ Thomas Brown remembered that his father, like many vacationing black Americans, "would drive for hours to... where hotels did not display signs saying 'Gentiles Only.'" Hotels that refused to accept Jews refused blacks as well.⁹ Cummings had similar impressions of apartment hunting in Portland: "I...was turned down... because I [was] black."¹⁰ In terms of generalized racial discrimination, Maine was "fundamentally no different from the rest of America," according to Gerald Talbot.¹¹

Black Mainers were denied access to pivotal sectors of the state's economy. In the nineteenth century black Mainers were employed as laborers, agricultural workers, stevedores, woodsmen, waitresses, laundry workers, and domestic servants.¹² In the twentieth century many worked as cooks, caterers, porters, custodians, restroom attendants, truckers, laborers, servants, and housekeepers. Extremely few, if any, became clerical workers, managers or supervisors, teachers, civil service personnel, and paper mill employees.¹³ Roger Ray, a white activist,

remembered from his childhood in the early 1900s that many white Mainers thought African Americans “were inferior socially...to the white population” and were expected to “do the menial work and [make] no waves.”¹⁴ Donald Fisher surmised that African Americans’ prospects were linked to skin color: “The lighter [the skin],...the better the chances.”¹⁵ However, most black Mainers were restricted by tradition or custom to the more unskilled and poorly paid occupations. Even though they were well educated and well recognized as members of their community, blacks found it difficult to secure rewarding work. White Mainers, according to Sterling Dymond, Jr., “got the [good] jobs and we couldn’t.”¹⁶ Mary Jane Cummings recalled that “when I graduated from high school, the only job that I was able to get was a job as an elevator operator...though I had taken business courses and had college courses also....It was almost like we knew what our place was without realizing it.”¹⁷ Denied access to equal housing and equal employment, black Mainers concluded that the state needed a civil-rights movement.

Although the civil-rights movement in Maine reached its peak in the 1960s, it spanned the better part of the twentieth century. Civil-rights politics surfaced in the early 1920s when black Bangor-area residents established a short-lived chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹⁸ Activities intensified at the end of the Second World War, partly due to the presence of black military personnel in Bangor and Portland and their resistance to segregated USOs and other forms of discrimination.¹⁹

The first postwar civil-rights organization appeared in 1945 when concerned black and white Bangor-area residents founded the Penobscot Interracial Forum. During the late 1940s, the Forum promoted events that celebrated African American history and culture and exposed cases of racial discrimination and racial insensitivity (like minstrel shows). Reflecting the expansive mood of the postwar American left, the Forum linked their civil-rights activities to a broader critique of American culture.²⁰ Subsequently, like radical civil-rights groups across



Portland's Green Memorial African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church continued a long tradition of hosting community projects by providing an institutional foundation for civil-rights activity in the area. *Bill Barry photo, Maine Historical Society.*

the nation, the Forum succumbed to the McCarthyism of the early 1950s.²¹

A second civil-rights organization emerged in 1947 when black Portland-area residents chartered a new Maine chapter of the NAACP. Together with the Progressive Party and the Penobscot Interracial Forum, the chapter lobbied for laws prohibiting racial discrimination in public accommodations, housing, and employment during the biennial state legislative sessions from 1947 through 1953. The Maine Chapter, unlike the Forum, survived McCarthyism, perhaps because it adhered to the moderate civil-rights philosophy prescribed by the NAACP

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National Office. More important, the chapter had strong ties to Maine's only black church, the Green Memorial African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church in Portland, whose roots dated to the 1820s.²² The Church served as headquarters for a variety of cultural, social, and religious activities and provided an institutional foundation for civil-rights activity in the area.²³ Yet survival for the Maine NAACP was not enough; the Chapter had to carry its message into the white community, where there was growing interest in the civil-rights movement.

During the late 1950s, the national civil-rights movement expanded its focus from litigation and legislative lobbying to nonviolent protests and mass civil disobedience. As the movement's politically moderate language and its emphasis on justice and equality attracted white support, Maine business and legal organizations began voicing an interest in civil rights.²⁴ In 1957, for example, the York County Dental Association, which included Jewish members, protested discrimination in public accommodations.²⁵ During the 1959 legislative session, the Maine Equal Opportunities Committee (MEOC), whose membership was comprised of some of the state's leading clergymen, academicians, and municipal officials, lobbied for a bill prohibiting racial and religious discrimination in public accommodations. MEOC's efforts were rewarded in 1959 when the state passed a public accommodations bill.²⁶

However, by this time the Maine NAACP had slipped to the periphery of the civil-rights movement, partly because it was divided into two factions. One faction regarded racism as a minor obstacle and felt that equality could be achieved through individual effort and good citizenship. Allen R. Stewart, a black Executive Committee officer, insisted that "colored people can get jobs if they go after them diligently and show that they're capable and willing....It's up to the individual."²⁷ A second faction felt that laws were needed to combat racism in Maine. The Reverend Granville A. Burnett, black pastor of the Green Memorial Church, argued that racial discrimination in housing and employment was overt.²⁸ This faction emphasized collective action and public protest to promote civil-rights legislation.

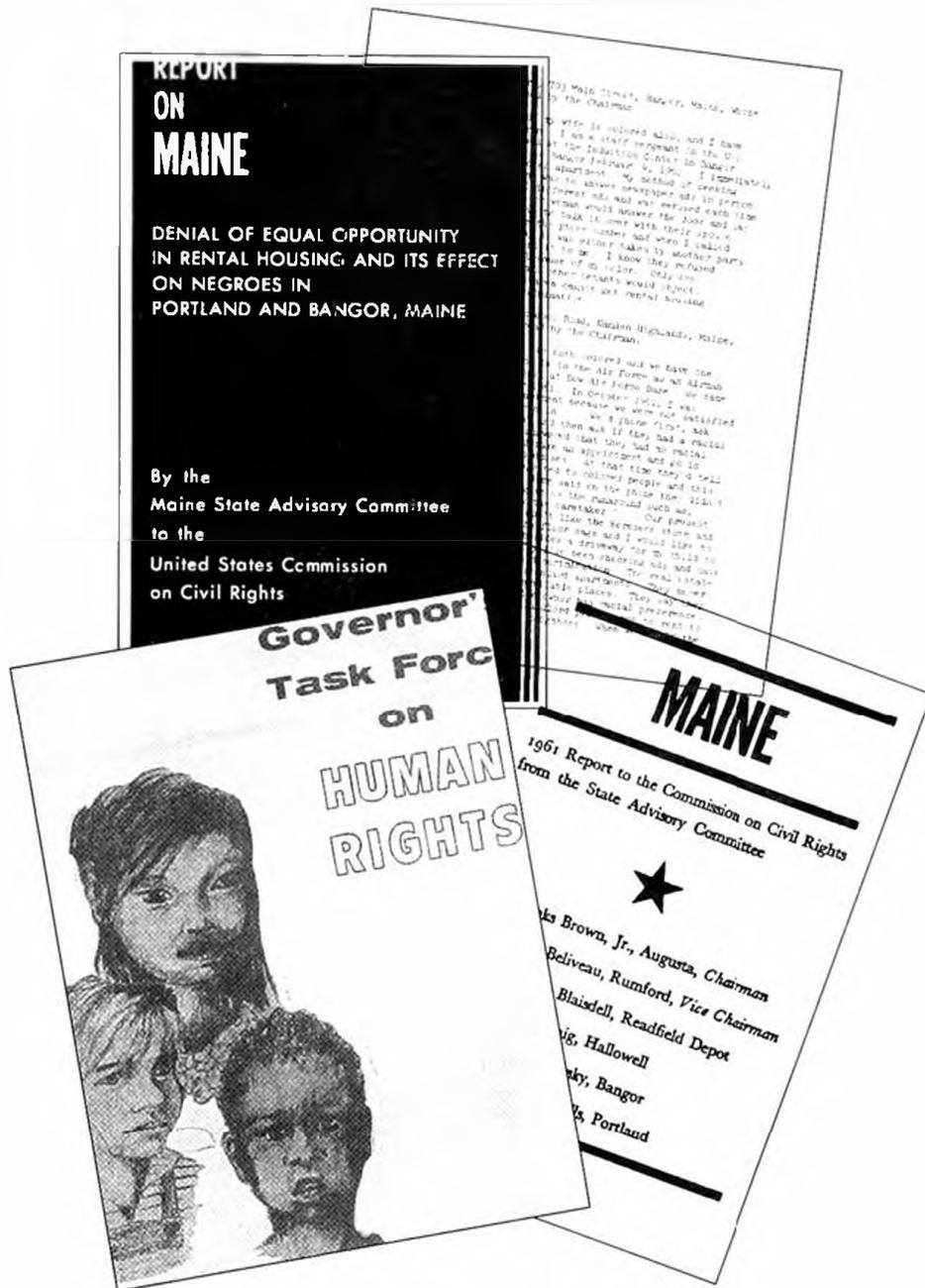
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Debates within the chapter reached an impasse. At one meeting attended by at least seventy-five people, the majority voted to simply send money to support the NAACP National Office, while a minority – Gerald Talbot, Leonard Cummings, and Eva Mae Straffer – called for demonstrations against racial discrimination here in Maine. Unable to reach a consensus, the chapter folded. It “just didn’t connect” with the changing times, Talbot summarized.²⁹

In the years after the collapse of the Maine Chapter, the civil-rights movement became more interracial. In 1960, Alberta Jackson, Lee Knowles, and other Lewiston-Auburn African Americans began discussing a new branch. The following year they received a charter for a Central Maine Branch of the Maine NAACP. “Almost overnight,” former Branch President Elizabeth Jonitis recalled, the chapter gained “a hundred members” from various walks of life. The increase was due to the work of black activists like Alberta Jackson, who organized among both blacks and whites. Some, like attorney Louis Scolnik, who would become a Maine Supreme Court Justice in the 1970s, had connections to Maine’s political elites. The Central Maine Branch soon became a magnet for activists from Portland, Bangor, Augusta, and Brunswick.³⁰

The Lewiston civil-rights organization focused primarily on racial discrimination in rental housing – a major problem for African-American military personnel and their families stationed in Maine. In fact, the next unit of the Maine NAACP was established in 1961 in nearby Brunswick, where a naval air station is located. The Central Maine and Brunswick branches worked to resolve private disputes between white landlords and black apartment seekers, not only in Lewiston and Brunswick but also in Bangor and Portland. They quickly resolved that a state law prohibiting racial discrimination in rental housing would be necessary.³¹

In December 1962 the Maine NAACP began a statewide campaign for a fair rental housing bill. Looking ahead to the 1963 legislative session, Louis Scolnik and fellow attorney Damion Scales modified the state’s 1959 public accommodations bill to



Between 1961 and 1965 a number of reports, including the Maine Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, documented the existence of racial discrimination. Since many white community leaders denied the existence of a "race problem" in Maine, such reports were a necessary prelude to civil-rights legislation.

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include rental housing.³² Their efforts received favorable media coverage and gained support from the Ministerial Association of Greater Portland and the Congressional Christian Conference of Maine.³³ In the 1963 session opponents advanced a number of arguments – that morality and choices regarding property should not be legislated; that racial discrimination did not exist in Maine; that anti-discrimination legislation would create racial antagonisms – and in June the legislature killed the fair rental housing bill.³⁴ The NAACP's case that black Mainers were affected by racism was weakened somewhat because it had not organized branches in Portland and Bangor, where most of the state's African Americans lived and where most complaints of housing discrimination were generated. To change that situation, the NAACP organized a branch in Bangor in 1963 and in Portland in 1964.³⁵ The latter proved to be the turning point for the civil-rights movement in Maine.

The Portland Branch of the Maine NAACP was founded amidst an important debate over appropriate forms of political action. Maine's black activists knew that the movement's success depended upon expanding into the white community, yet the degree of white involvement provoked discussion. In the weeks leading up to the founding of the Portland Branch, two opposing factions vied for leadership. One faction was led by the Reverend John Bruce, pastor of the Green Memorial Church, and the other by white clergymen like the Reverend Birger Johnson of Woodsford Congregational Church and former Governor Horace Hildreth, who, along with Bangor's most influential black citizen, the Reverend Milton Geary, felt that civil disobedience might lead to violence or provoke a backlash from white racists. Bruce considered Hildreth too conservative – a drag on the civil-rights movement. Hildreth in turn charged that Bruce, who was not a native Mainer, would alienate white Mainers. The anti-Bruce faction gained the political advantage, and its chosen candidate for branch president, Gerald Talbot, won the election in May 1964. Despite its moderate leadership, the Portland Branch, once organized, started building a

high-profile movement through mass action, legislative lobbying, court litigation, and media publicity.³⁶

With Portland organized, Maine NAACP members stepped up their activities, targeting racial discrimination in rental housing. Some worked on the Maine Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, organizing public hearings in which African Americans testified about discrimination in rental housing. In 1964 Portland activists conducted a housing survey, finding a nascent black ghetto in the city. Central Maine spokesperson Louis Scolnik informed the media that discrimination in rental housing was “the number one problem faced by a Negro in Maine.” In March 1965, during nationally televised coverage of civil-rights demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, the Maine Legislature took up the fair rental housing bill. As Maine’s NAACP members packed committee hearings, they encountered vigorous opposition from landlords, relators, and conservative legislators who used arguments similar to those made in the 1963 session. Nevertheless, the state passed a weakened version of the bill in May.³⁷

The Maine NAACP expanded its activities in the mid-1960s to include lectures and forums on civil rights, membership drives, fund-raising events, newspaper publicity, and interracial social gatherings, such as picnics and dances. Members formed working relationships with the state’s Native-American communities and with sister NAACP branches in the South. Still, the perception that the 1965 fair rental housing bill had struck a fatal blow against racism presented a significant challenge to the organization. Between 1965 and 1966 membership dropped from 575 to 351, even though African Americans – and other ethnic groups – continued to experience discrimination in areas such as employment, police-community relations, and even in rental housing. Placing these serious problems in perspective, Gerald Talbot speculated that if Maine’s black population had been larger, riots similar to those occurring elsewhere in urban America during the mid-1960s would have erupted in the state. NAACP activists looked beyond the fair rental housing laws to



The Maine NAACP expanded its activities in the mid-1960s to include lectures and forums, fund-raising events, newspaper publicity, and nonviolent demonstrations. In March 1965 citizens gathered in Portland's City Hall Plaza to protest violence against civil-rights workers in Selma, Alabama. Above (left to right) the Reverends Clarence Tyson and W. Conceen and Rabbi Morris Berkritsky pray for racial harmony. *Courtesy of the African-American Archive of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library.*

seek an institutionalized commitment to protect Maine citizens against racism.³⁸

The civil-rights movement renewed its effort to commit Maine to a civil-rights program after the April 1968 assassination



of Martin Luther King, Jr. At the urging of an ad hoc committee of black and white civil-rights leaders, Governor Kenneth Curtis established a Task Force on Human Rights in June. Ten of its twenty-six members were affiliated with the NAACP. The task force worked with African Americans, the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot Indians, and other groups to build support for human-rights legislation. Its report, submitted to Governor Curtis later that year, documented the deficiencies in existing laws and the ongoing human rights abuses in areas such as education, housing, and employment. The Task Force called upon the state to tighten its public policy against discrimination.³⁹

Civil-rights activists, including some members of the Task Force, lobbied for the establishment of a Maine Human Rights Commission in the 1969 legislature. The initiative was killed in 1969, but in 1971 activists renewed their efforts. Again, they confronted opponents who argued that such an agency was unnecessary in Maine. Initially, the House voted down the bill by a small majority, but support from Curtis and a favorable vote in the Senate saw the bill through the legislature. Two decades

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of civil-rights activism culminated in creation of the Maine Human Rights Commission, whose mission it was to safeguard and promote the rights of all citizens in Maine.⁴⁰

Maine activists created a civil-rights movement in an environment free from overt, institutionalized racism. Unlike the South, where racial violence and recalcitrant local and state officials triggered a national outcry, African Americans in Maine faced subtle but insidious forms of racial inequality. Still, they were able to bring public pressure to bear upon the state, which between 1965 and 1971 moved steadily to prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, religion, and gender.⁴¹ Black Mainers succeeded because they received widespread support from white Mainers, including those in high social and political positions. Although African Americans still face various forms of racism, they, like other minorities, can draw upon a legal and administrative apparatus pledged to defend them against racial prejudice. “What [African Americans] need[ed] to do,” said Anita Talbot, “was [to] zero in on legislation, politics...to get laws on the books.”⁴² Working together, black and white activists forced the state to guarantee equal treatment in housing, jobs, and public accommodations – a legacy shared by all Mainers today.

NOTES

¹The author wishes to thank the interviewees for their time and information and especially Gerald Talbot, Jean Sampson, Sterling Dymond, Jr., and Willard Callender, Jr. for allowing him access to their private files since it appears that Maine NAACP papers are nonexistent. Dr. Marli Weiner reviewed earlier drafts of this essay. The author thanks Bloomsburg University and the State System of Higher Education Office of Social Equity (Pennsylvania) for funding that helped toward the completion of this article. Transcripts and tapes of the interviews, made in 1990 and 1991, are available at the University of Maine Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History.

²Gerald Talbot interview, October 27, 1990.

³Maine State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Report on Maine: Denial of Equal Opportunity in Rental Housing and Its Effects on Negroes in Portland and Bangor, Maine* (Augusta: Maine State Advisory Committee, 1964), p. 1.

⁴The last form of official racial segregation ended in 1856 when Portland closed its segregated school and integrated the black students into the public school system because there were too few students to justify a separate school. See Rosella Adeline Loveitt, "The Social History of Portland, Maine, from 1840 to 1860," M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1940, p. 50.

⁵See James Mundy, *Hard Times, Hard Men: Maine and the Irish, 1830-1860* (Scarborough, Maine: Harp Publications, 1990); Lawrence Wayne Moores, Jr., "The History of the Ku Klux Klan in Maine, 1922-1931," M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1950.

⁶*Characteristics of the Population: Maine* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973); *Maine's NonWhite Population* (Orono: University of Maine Agricultural Experiment Station, 1964), p. 4; *Bangor News*, March 7, 1991. On long-term residential stability among black families, see interviews with Sterling Dymond, Jr., interview, November 10, 1990; Donald Fisher interview, November 22, 1990; Willard Callender, Jr., interview November 21, 1990;

⁷In time, the larger Irish-American and French-Canadian populations won greater acceptance from Anglo Protestant Mainers and moved up the socioeconomic ladder. For a general history of African Americans in the North, see Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

⁸Mary Jane Cummings and Leonard Cummings interview, November 28, 1990.

⁹Thomas Brown quoted in Dennis Bailey, "Some People Still Think the Word 'Nigger' Is Funny: Blacks Don't," *Maine Times*, November 26, 1982.

¹⁰Cummings interview. See Charles L. Lumpkins, "Civil Rights Activism in Maine from the 1940s to 1971: Black Mainers, Black and White Activists, and the Resistance against Racism," M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1992, pp. 56-62.

¹¹Talbot interview. See also Cummings interview; Dymond interview; Donald Fisher interview; Stanley Evans interview, May 13, 1992.

¹²Randolph Stakeman, "The Black Population of Maine, 1764-1900," *New England Journal of Black Studies* 8 (1989): 17-8; *Maine Times*, December 3, 1976; *Maine Sunday Telegram*, February 17, 1991; *The Register: The Weekly Newspaper of Greater Brewer-Bangor*, June 8, 15, 1988.

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¹³Matheson, "Bangor's Black Community"; *Maine's Nonwhite Population*, p. 8; *Lewiston Journal Sunday Magazine*, December 29, 1962, January 5, 1963.

¹⁴Roger Ray interview May 12, 1992.

¹⁵Fisher interview.

¹⁶Dymond interview.

¹⁷Cummings interview.

¹⁸*Bangor News*, February 21, 1921, February 9, 1925.

¹⁹Cummings interview; Dymond interview; Fisher interview.

²⁰See for example *Bangor News*, December 4, 1945, February 13, 1947, March 15, 1951. On the postwar political left and the civil rights movement see Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1991), pp. 15-18; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 787.

²¹Cyril Robert Friedman, "Attitudes toward Protest Strategy and Participation in Protest Groups among Negro Americans," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1967, p. 70.

²¹Friedman, "Attitudes toward Protest Strategy," p. 70.

²²*Boston Sunday Globe Magazine*, March 6, 1983; *Portland Press Herald*, February 12, 1949; "Obituaries: Clarence L. Roberts, NAACP Pioneer," *Portland Evening Express*, May 6, 1989.

²³Fisher interview. See also Cummings interview; Talbot interview; Anita Talbot interview, November 28, 1990. For a brief history of the church see *Portland Evening Express*, October 22, 1977; "Anchor of the Soul" (video, 1993, distributed by Northeast Historic Films, Bucksport, Maine).

²⁴Cummings interview; Fisher interview; Gerald Talbot interview; Callender interview; Ray interview; Stuart M. Gross interview, September 6, 1991; Judith and Stephen Halpert interview, November 3, 1990.

²⁵*Portland Evening Express*, July 13, 1962.

²⁶*Legislative Record of the 99th Legislature* (Augusta, 1959), p. 903.

²⁷*Portland Sunday Telegram*, May 3, 1959.

²⁸*Portland Sunday Telegram*, April 26, 1959.

²⁹Gerald Talbot interview; Cummings interview.

³⁰Jean Sampson interview November 29, 1990; Elizabeth and Peter Jonitis interview November 8, 1990; membership lists from the private files of Jean Sampson.

³¹Sampson interview; *Brunswick Record*, November 16, 1961, January 18, 1962.

³²Letter to Marion L. Ulmer, December 28, 1962; form letter, February 27, 1963, private files of Jean Sampson.

³³*Portland Press Herald*, March 26, 1963; *Legislative Record of the 101st Legislature*, (Augusta, 1963), pp. 2411-3; *Portland Press Herald*, April 6, 1963.

³⁴*Legislative Record* (1963), pp. 2413-20, 2727-67, 3119-23.

³⁵*Bangor News*, February 3, 1964.

³⁶*Portland Press Herald*, April 22, 27, May 12, 1964; *Bangor News*, August 27, 1963; *Portland Sunday Telegram*, September 29, 1963, April 5, 1964; *Portland Evening Express*, April 8, May 11, 1964; Gerald Talbot interview; Cummings interview; Callender interview; Halpert interview.

³⁷*Portland Evening Express*, June 10, 1964; February 1, March 17, 28, 1965; Maine State Advisory Committee, *Report on Maine*, p. 1; *Bangor News*, April 28, 1964, March 3, 15, 1965; Willard Callender, Jr., *A Survey of the Negro Community in the City of Portland* (1964), private files of Willard Callender, Jr.; *Maine Sunday Telegram*, January 3, 1965;

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Portland Press Herald, February 1, 17, 22, March 15, 1965), 1, 16; Sampson interview; Callender interview; Gerald Talbot interview; Willard Callender, Jr., "To the Judiciary Committee, 102nd Legislature, State of Maine," [presented to a legislative hearing during the 1965 session], private files of Willard Callender, Jr.; *Legislative Record of the 102nd Legislature* (Augusta, 1965), pp. 211, 114, 2099-2109, 2198-2203, 2487.

³⁸Sampson interview; Jonitis interview; Gerald Talbot interview; Callender interview; Cummings interview; *Bangor News*, February 7, 1966, March 1, 1972; *Portland Evening Express*, March 16, August 1, 2, 1966; *Portland Press Herald*, April 15, 1969, August 1, 1966; New England Regional Conference of Branches, NAACP, *Annual Report*, p. 6; Gerald Talbot interview; Fisher interview, Halpert interview; James Duff Gillespie interview, June 28, 1991.

³⁹Gerald Talbot interview; David C. Smith interview, November 16, 1990; Stanley Evans interview, May 13, 1992; *Portland Press Herald*, June 25, 1968; Governor's Task Force on Human Rights, *Recommendations of the Governor's Task Force on Human Rights* (Augusta, 1968), p. 14; *Portland Evening Express*, January 8, 1969.

⁴⁰*Legislative Record of the Third Special Session of the 103rd Legislature of the State of Maine* (Augusta, 1969), p. 537; *Legislative Record of the 104th Legislature of the State of Maine* (Augusta, 1969), pp. 1799-1802, 2704, 2723-4, 2895-6, 2927, 3523-4, 3974-5, 4196-9, 4549-50, 4621-6; *Legislative Record of the 105th Legislature of the State of Maine* (Augusta, 1971), pp. 2440-6, 2676, 4342, 4579-4598, 4633-47; Gerald Talbot interview; Evans interview; Smith interview.

⁴¹Cummings interview; Gerald Talbot interview; Evans interview. By the early 1970s, the commission was handling more cases of discrimination based on gender than race.

⁴²Anita Talbot interview.