

# Searching for

Join us on a **journey** to  
the National Mall.  
**No waiting in line.**

BY COLIN W. SARGENT & SARAH MOORE

**W**E ARRIVE IN WASHINGTON, D.C. by train. It's an eight-minute taxi ride from Union Station to the **National Museum of African American History and Culture**.

The Washington Monument looms to our left. Our cab pulls up to the front door. We join a group of excited children in blue uniforms emblazoned Montessori Magnet School. The line moves incredibly quickly, contrary to all we'd heard. "You should have seen it last week," our taxi driver says.

When we tried to reserve our free timed passes three months ago, no advance spots were left for the day we were scheduled to arrive. We could have risked trying to get some same-day passes once we got into town, but on any given day we looked at the site, we saw they were sold out by 7 a.m. So on to eBay. The prices went from "\$60 for four tickets or best offer." Some re-sellers were asking as much

as \$200 for two tickets.

We ended up paying \$40 for a pair. "Our tickets are for 3 p.m., but it's 1:30," we say to the lady at the gate. "Is there a place we can wait inside, or can we get some lunch before our time starts?"

"Just follow them," she says. "Once you're in, you're in."

Hungry, we take the escalator down to the cafeteria, which is divided into three tantalizing food geographies to begin our three-dimensional experience. Should we try "The Creole Coast" (shrimp and grits, catfish, gumbo); "The Agricultural South" (Brunswick stew, chicken and waffles); or "The Western Range?" I see a chef with dreadlocks. I say, "I'm from Maine. If I want to channel that, what should I order?"

A big smile. "Beef brisket sandwich."

Okay!

The food is wildly delicious. The vibe is upbeat, quietly triumphant, relaxed. We seat ourselves at the family-style table, and

everyone makes small talk. A quote from Langston Hughes shimmers on the wall. "*They send me to eat in the kitchen when company comes, but I laugh, and eat well, and grow strong.*"

According to Gerald E. Talbot and H.H. Price in *Maine's Visible Black History* (Tilbury House), Langston Hughes stayed in Maine at Ethel Goode Franklin's guest house in Ogunquit during the production of one of his plays. "...Most of her guests were blacks." In Old Orchard Beach, a destination attraction was "110," for 110 Portland Avenue, which welcomed guests from Duke Ellington to Cab Calloway, Count Basie, and Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen. In Kittery, vacationers loved Rock Rest.

A single woman joins us.

"Where are you from?" we ask.

"California."

She looks around, taking in the excitement. "Well, it took over 100 years of try-



# Maine in the Nation's New Attic

ing, and they finally got their museum.”

*They.*

This reminds us that we all have some work to do.

The Museum's galleries are deftly organized. *Past at the bottom, future at the top.* We start at the very beginning, Level C3, three floors below ground level, and see how the Triangle Trade worked, and still works. After all, Portland's sugar refineries made us the sixth biggest port on the East Coast when people were enslaved.

Was Portland part of that deadly Triangle? Of course it was, and the effects linger, the good with the painful. On the wall of a multimedia exhibit is a quote from William Cowper, 1788: “I admit I am sickened at the purchase of slaves...but I must be mumm, for how could we do without sugar or rum?”

The variation of that I heard while growing up and going to Deering High School in Portland was, “The South is so

backward. We'd have never done anything like *that* here. And it's not our problem, being so far north. There are almost no blacks here.’

None that ‘we’ had the eyes to see, anyway. African Americans have contributed so much to the making of everything we think of as American, and always have been a driving part of the making of Maine. The enslaved often weren't listed on ship manifests. Freed men and Freemen were often not identified by race early on, and so shared invisibility. All Mainers benefited and therefore still benefit today. Maine's very statehood was born of an ugly compromise that granted our admission to the Union at the cost of unrestricted slavery in Missouri. The KKK thrived here in the 1920s. None of this was taught in the classroom.

As we walk through this magnificent new museum, brilliant in its evolution, another museum starts to take shape in our

heads—one that specifically showcases Maine's history and Maine's stake in it. Macon Bolling Allen, the first African American lawyer ever to pass the bar exam, lived in Maine. John Russwurm, the third African American ever to graduate from college, went to Bowdoin and was pals with fellow undergrads Longfellow and Hawthorne. He started the first African American newspaper in the United States, in New York. His house is across the street from Cheverus High School. The Abyssinian Church on the East End is of national significance.

Clearly, Portland's soaring prospects in the 19th century, built and barreled on the rum trade, were built on the backs of enslaved people as the Old Port shot up in the 1850s, and even when we rebuilt it so quickly after the Great Fire in 1866. The slave trade ensured Portland's glory days.

For a great historical novel featuring a Portlander's African American point of view, read *Pyrrhus Venture* by William Da-



vid Barry and Randolph Dominic.

As we ascend level by level, there are tearful moments of recognition in this cathartic museum, because even as the screens shift with new revelations, the museumgoers themselves are thinking, changing.

We learn that people who threw themselves overboard during the Middle Passage to escape enslavement were said to be “flying home” to the land of their birth.

We are moved by a pair of child-sized shackles next to those of an adult.

When we see a training aircraft used by the Tuskegee Airmen (above), we are reminded of Eugene Jackson, who died in 2015. Born in Portland, Jackson’s family had been Mainers since the late 1700s. He graduated from Portland High School in 1941.

James Sheppard, 92, a Tuskegee Airman, grew up in Harlem. He lives in South Portland now.

There are exhibits about W.E.B. Du Bois, who came to Maine many summers to rest and study with fellow members of the Gun and Rod Club (see sidebar). Also up in lights is a copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Maine’s Harriet Beecher Stowe (see “Lasting Legacies,” opposite page).

An eight-year-old is looking at an exhibit of three figures, from left to right, Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

His mother asks him, “Have you ever heard of these names? Do they teach them in school?”

“No.”

“Well, if you don’t know something, what do you do?”

He pulls a cell phone from his pocket.

His mother catches us watching, and we all smile.

—Colin W. Sargent



## A Maine Sanctuary

Recognized as one of the greatest minds of his time, **W.E.B Du Bois** (1868-1963), the multi-talented writer, academic, scientist, activist, and the first black student awarded a Ph.D. from Harvard, sought sanctuary in Maine for two weeks every summer from 1933 until his death in 1963. One of the original founders of the NAACP, Du Bois became a member **The Cambridge Gun & Rod Club** in West Gardiner, a progressive interracial organization in its own right. Established by 1894, the club served as a kind of retreat for intellectuals of any race to relax and embrace nature. For Du Bois, who had been dogged by FBI investigations for years due to alleged Communist ties, the club served as an annual foxhole in which to retreat from the world for a time.

**James L. Brown IV**, the club’s historian, told *Portland Monthly* in 2001, “Du Bois may even have come up with his famous concept of “The Talented Tenth” beside the shore of Lake Cobbosseecontee. “Where else could a group of black intellectuals congregate and share experiences during a time when shadows of slavery itself darkened the national experience?” [See our story “The W.E.B Du Bois Files,” February/March 2014 “Best of the Best” issue.]



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# Lasting Legacies

Meet some Mainers immortalized in the Museum.

**W**hen exploring Maine's black history, one name appears time and time again, an echo. **Gerald E. Talbot's** work as an activist, educator, historian, and the first African American member of the Maine House of Representatives has shaped our state's social landscape for over half a century.

We asked Talbot, 86, and his wife, **Anita**, what they'd most like to see in the new Smithsonian museum. "As the parents of four daughters, we'd like to visit any exhibit that focuses on the contributions of African American women. In particular, **Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Harriet E. Wilson.** We'd spend time with each of these women individually. We'd also feel proud to see those who played a significant role in the development of our own state: **Tate Cummings, Kippy and Harold Richardson, Eugene Jackson, William Burney Sr. and William Burney Jr.,** and all of the women who were members of the **Mister Ray Club** in Portland and the **Carver Club** in Bangor.

"We'd feel forever blessed to see these extraordinary lives recognized. Their sacrifice has been our collective reward."

And after that? "We wouldn't delay in advocating for so many more to be included."

We asked their daughter **Rachel Talbot Ross**, a legislator and representative for Portland, the first thing she'd want to see at the Museum. She is forthright. "Honestly? I'd like to see my father in the Museum. I find it hard to think of anyone else in Maine who's contributed so much."

While Maine's presence in the Museum is profound, it is not yet definitive. Today, we celebrate the people of Maine who have earned their place in its halls and wait in anticipation for the inclusion of many more.

## GAME CHANGERS

A few days after **Macon Bolling Allen** passed the Bar exam in Portland, a reporter from *The Brunswicker* wrote, "We think we have heard of a colored physician somewhere at the South, in New York, probably, but we have never before heard of a colored lawyer in this country" [*Maine's Visible Black History*].

As it turns out, the paper's speculation was spot on. On July 3, 1844, Allen passed an examination that established him as the first African American licensed to practice law in the U.S.

"I can only imagine how difficult that would have been," says **Danielle Conway**, who in 2015, over 130 years after Allen's admission to the Bar, became the first African American dean of UMaine Law School. "Against a backdrop of slavery, against all the symbols of your supposed inferiority, you have to stand up and prove yourself. You're carrying the weight of



Danielle Conway, dean of UMaine School of Law

## Breaking the Mold



When **James Augustine Healy** (1830-1900) was ordained Bishop of Portland, he was also making history as the first-ever black Roman Catholic bishop in the U.S. Born into slavery on a Georgia plantation, the son of an African American mother and an Irish father, Healy had grown up in a world where prejudice against both blacks and Catholics was rampant in the North and South. On both counts—his color and his faith—Healy was in the minority of Mainers when he became Bishop of all Maine and New Hampshire in April of 1875, with barely 50 priests in his huge diocese. [*Portland Monthly*, February/March 1999]

## PERSPECTIVE

# From The Greatest with Love

Lewiston was a small mill town of a little over 40,000 residents when an event simultaneously described as “the fourth-greatest sports moment of the twentieth century” [*Sports Illustrated*] and “the biggest mess in sporting history” [*NPR*] landed in its midst. In May of 1965, two of the greatest fighters of the time swept into town, carrying in their wake a flood of spectators, glitterati, and over 600 reporters. Through a stroke of luck, local pawnbroker Sam Michael was given 18 days to turn the Central Maine Youth Center into the stage for the high-profile rematch between Sonny “The Bear” Liston and Muhammad Ali, fighting for the first time since converting to Islam and discarding his ‘slave name,’ Cassius Clay.

“You can’t swing a cat in Lewiston without hitting someone who has a story about the fight,” says filmmaker **Gary Robinov** of White Dog Arts in Portland, creator of *Raising Ali*, a documentary film celebrating the 50th anniversary of Lewiston’s moment in the national spotlight.

What did The Louisville Lip make of his legendary win in Maine? Following the film’s release, Robinov and executive producer Charlie Hewitt, the Maine sculptor and artist, received this letter from the man himself:



We spoke to the man himself about the legendary fight in Lewiston

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

[“Muhammad Ali Remembers Maine,” February/March 2002]

**What was the strangest thing about your fight in Maine?**

**Ali:** “I don’t remember anything strange. I do remember going back to my room after and having a bowl of the best ice cream!”

**What one image comes back to you from that night?**

**Ali:** “Sonny going down in the first minute of the fight.”

**Did you get to try any Maine lobster?**

**Ali:** “Because of my religious beliefs I did not eat lobster.”

It’s hard to believe fifty years have passed since Sonny Liston and I met in the ring in Lewiston, Maine. The years have flown by and with it, that young twenty-three-year-old man who had the audacity to step into the ring a second time to face Sonny, has grown older and hopefully wiser with the benefit of time.

A smile comes over my face as my wife reads me the request from Sandy Marquis, inviting me to participate in the world premiere of the documentary, *Raising Ali*, a wonderful tribute to the people of Lewiston. Although I’m not able to join you, my spirit is there, dancing and moving, just like I did fifty years ago.

It is ironic that Sonny was the town’s favorite to win the match and reclaim the World Heavyweight Title that night. And today it is me, Muhammad Ali, Sonny’s opponent, who arrived in Lewiston for the first time after changing his name and converting to Islam, who is being embraced. I’m humbled that I still provoke conversation and interest in this community but feel blessed to be remembered by so many.

I want to thank the citizens of Lewiston for continuing to make me a part of your community and history. And thank you for opening your hearts, minds and community to my Muslim brothers and sisters.

May God bless you all and believe it or not, in my book you are

**The Greatest!**

With much love and gratitude,  
Muhammad Ali

your entire race in that moment.” Conway taught at William S. Richardson School of Law in Hawaii before trading palm trees for pine trees. The Philadelphia native is enthusiastic on the subject of Macon Bolling Allen and the historical ties that unite them across time. As America’s first black lawyer, first black justice of the peace, and the cofounder of the country’s first black law practice, Allen carved inroads into a historically elite practice into which, many decades later, Conway is making her own mark.

“It makes me feel connected to Maine in a fundamental way,” Conway says. Her eyes light up. “You know what else? I graduated from Howard University in Washington D.C., which was actually founded by Oliver Otis Howard. He was a Civil War General from Leeds, Maine.” President Andrew Johnson appointed Howard Commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau

in 1865. His name can be found in the Museum archives. “The school was steeped in history. It really aimed to imbue us with pride in the black genealogy of the law.”

Conway was first introduced to Allen’s legacy through the work of her professor, J. Clay Smith. In the first page of *Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer 1844-1944*, Clay writes that Allen “presented the first

challenge to America’s legal community [...] at a period when most black people were constitutionally enslaved.”

Those first pioneering steps into the whitewashed world of law were a laborious uphill struggle. Allen was initially denied admission to the bar in Maine at a time when “anyone of good moral character” was eligible because, as an African American, he was not legally a U.S. citizen. Local abolitionist and Allen’s tutor Samuel Fessenden used his influence to persuade the committee of the Cumberland Bar for an admission by examination. Nonetheless, Allen struggled to find clients in Maine and was forced to Massachusetts in 1845 in search of work. Allen, unable to afford transportation, walked 50 miles to his Massachusetts Bar exam and still passed, according to historian Stephen Kendrick.

**Contemporary Influences From Maine:**  
Freeport artist Abigail Gray Swartz’s illustrated interpretation of Rosie the Riveter as a black woman wearing a pink ‘Pussyhat’ recently made a splash on the cover of *The New Yorker*. USM Stonecoast MFA alumna Patricia Smith draws crowds. Her volume *Blood Dazzler* was a finalist for the National Book Awards for Poetry.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STANLEY WESTON; COLLECTION OF THE SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE; ALAN KARCHNER/NMAAHC; INSET: THE NEW YORKER; FILE PHOTOS; COURTESY PHOTO

## FREEDOM'S JOURNAL.



### Written in Time

Born in Jamaica in 1799, the illegitimate son of a white planter and a black slave went on to become the third African American to graduate from an American university. **John Russwurm** was sent to Maine to be educated as a young boy on his father's wishes. At the age of 25, he entered Bowdoin College. In *Personal Recollections of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Horatio Bridge (Class of 1825) recalls visiting Russwurm in his college lodging, noting, "His sensitiveness on account of his color prevented him from returning the calls." In spite of this, Russwurm was warmly befriended by classmates Hawthorne and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

After graduation, Russwurm was drawn to the buzz of New York City. In 1827, he became co-editor of *Freedom's Journal*—the first African-American newspaper, alongside Presbyterian minister Samuel E. Cornish. The first issue of the weekly publication proudly declared: "We wish to plead our own case. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations in things which concern us deeply." The post as editor lasted just a year before Russwurm, so discouraged by the apparent lack of progress in the abolition effort, lost faith in the paper. He resigned from *Freedom's Journal* in 1828 and the next year sailed for Liberia. Though he lived out the rest of his years in Africa, Russwurm forever held his Maine education in high regard. In 1849, Russwurm made one final trip to the U.S. to enroll his two sons at Yarmouth Academy.

Conway finds a synchronicity in becoming the first African American (and only the second female) dean of UMaine Law in the same city where Macon Bolling Allen made history. An expert in government procurement and intellectual property law, an Army veteran, and a professor, Conway's rise to the top has been meteoric in comparison to Allen's excruciating struggle against a tide of prejudice.

"The people who have preceded me have reaffirmed my place in the world," she says. "Taking this job, I was presented with people who had reservations about me teaching here as a black woman. But diversity is such a fundamental component of productivity, and I believe that law is the ultimate tool in the pursuit of freedom and justice."

From law to literature, Maine's place in the annals of black history is often surpris-

*(Continued on page 71)*

# WORLD WAR I



## and the Maine Experience



A century ago, globalization, shifting economies, and extreme nationalism led to one of the most devastating wars ever fought.

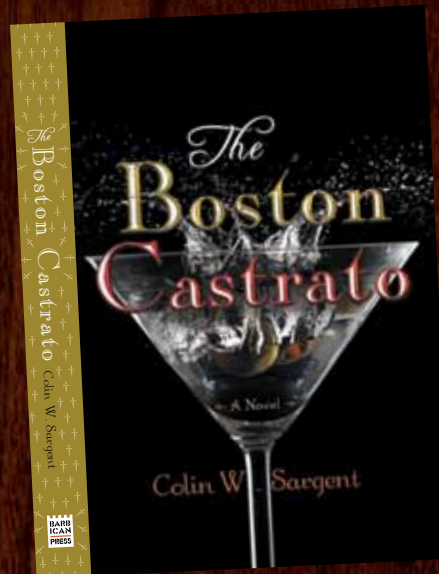
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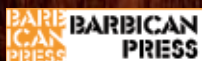
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*Lasting Legacies* (continued from page 63) ing and unexpected—and sometimes only discovered long after the fact.

## UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

If walls could talk, those of the Stowe House on 63 Federal Street, Brunswick, would surely tell a colorful tale. Many famous guests have known its rooms, from writer **Harriet Beecher Stowe**—for whom the house is named, to a young Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and even honeymooners Bette Davis and Gary Merrill. Perhaps the most intriguing visitor of all spent only one night here, and most likely slept in a cupboard.

In the late months of 1850, **John Andrew Jackson**, fleeing enslavement in South Carolina, arrived at Harriet Beecher Stowe's door under cover of darkness.

"We have a letter sent from Stowe to her sister that proves Jackson took refuge in her home in Brunswick that night," says **Tess Chakkalaka**, Professor of Africana Studies and English at Bowdoin, who spent 2008-2016 working to restore the house and establish its place on the **National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom**.

"To me, the house is so important because it was here that Stowe really proved



Tess Chakkalaka, Professor of Africana Studies and English at Bowdoin.

what kind of woman she was," she says. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, also known as the Bloodhound Law, had passed only weeks before. Anyone caught assisting an enslaved fugitive could face six months in jail.

"The risk of what Stowe did was not just legal," says Chakkalaka. "She also harbored a stranger, a man, in the home where she lived with just her children [Stowe's husband was not yet living in Brunswick]. She took him in, examined the whip marks on his back, and gave him five dollars and a letter of introduction for his arrival in Canada. He played and sang to her young children. Their interaction showed an exchange between equals."

**U**ndoubtedly, the encounter with Jackson, coming face-to-face with the scars and stories etched by enslavement, had a profound effect on Stowe. Just a few months later, she would pen the first installment of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the anti-slavery story that would become the best-selling book of the 19th century, second only to the Bible.

Jackson successfully escaped through Maine into New Brunswick, Canada and

from there on to London, England, where he established himself as a lecturer and writer. Given her later success, Stowe's letter of introduction helped open doors internationally. In the foreword to his powerful memoir, *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina*, Jackson writes:

"During my flight from Salem to Canada, I met with a very sincere friend and helper, who gave a refuge during the night. Her name was Mrs. Beecher Stowe [...] she listened with great interest to my story."

"This is one of the only instances where an example of the Underground Railroad is corroborated by *both* parties: Jackson in his book and Stowe in her letters to her sister," says Chakkalaka. The evidence enabled Chakkalaka and a team of researchers to get the Harriet Beecher Stowe house listed on the National Underground Railroad Network.

Today, next to a cramped cupboard in the kitchen, a small plaque hangs in testament to a night in 1850 when two writers met in secret, quietly altering the course of each other's lives. ■

—By Sarah Moore

We are curating an online resource based around the African American experience in Maine, starting with a collection of *Portland Monthly* stories from over the years. We welcome your ideas, input, and information to help develop this online museum. Please email [staff@portlandmonthly.com](mailto:staff@portlandmonthly.com).