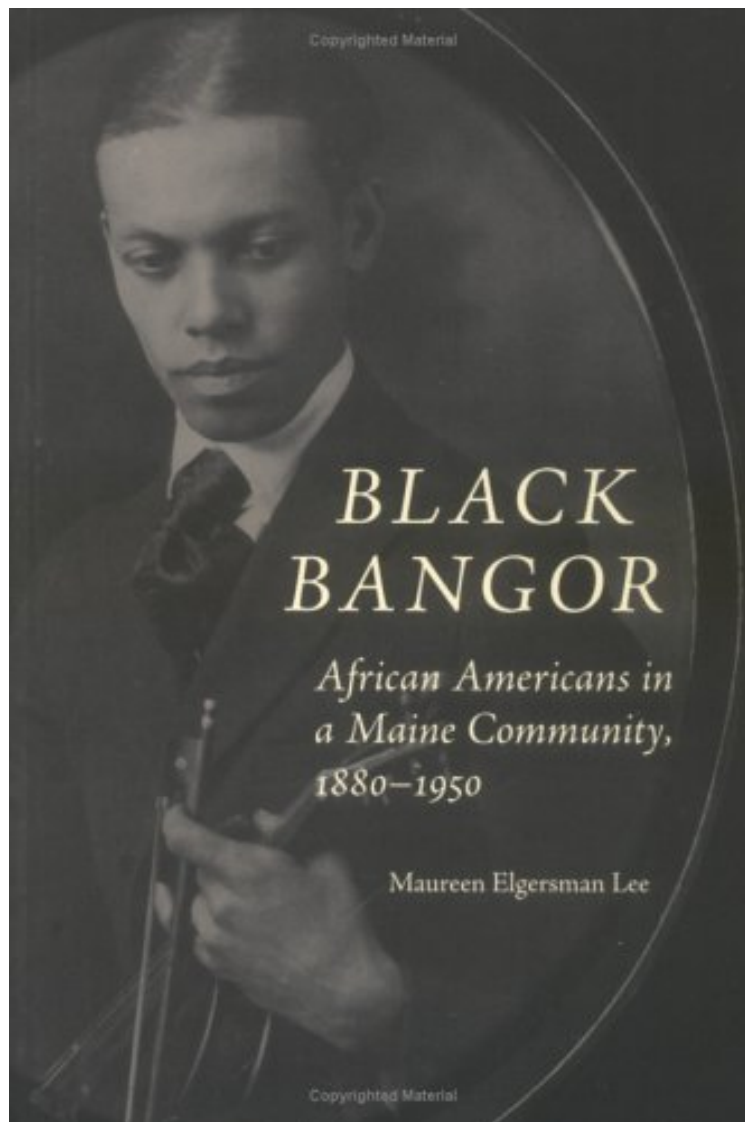


[Download pdf ebook] Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880-1950 (Revisiting New England)

Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880-1950 (Revisiting New England)

Maureen Lee

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Maureen Lee : Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880-1950 (Revisiting New England) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880-1950 (Revisiting New England):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. We Have Always Been Here!By Phebe Ann JacobsExcellent,

researched, readable. There is so little, other than primary source material, that has shown up in readable form, covering these years in the lives of African descent people in New England. Phebe Ann Jacobs of New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Maine, but birthed in New Jersey is an earlier example. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Insightful and Excellent History By Valorie T. In *Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880-1950*, author Maureen Elgersman Lee attempts to fill what she calls a void in the narrative of the African American experience in one of the whitest states America, Maine (xiv). Lee is primarily focused on answering a few specific questions about the Bangor black community: what did it mean to be black in Bangor, how did Bangor's small black population create their own community, and how did they live within a white majority. To answer her questions, Lee sections her book into four topical chapters. Chapter one investigates the migration and settlement of African Americans and foreign blacks into Maine, and specifically Bangor. Chapter two describes the sort of labor the black Bangor population was involved in. Chapter three portrays the daily life of a black citizen of Bangor. Chapter four is about how the blacks of Bangor used already existing institutions and also created their own to meet their needs. Lee states in her introduction that she will start each chapter with snippets of the lives of select Bangor citizens as a way to illustrate the points she makes within (xvii). Lee offers full disclosure of the problems of her usable sources, announcing to the reader from the start that the federal census data she uses contains gaps that can be filled in only so much by narrowing state statistics to a local level, and that the manuscript census too contains errors due to illegibility and fire damage (xviii). In chapter one, Lee spends a great deal of time discussing numbers and percentages. While these are intended to give the reader the statistics and scope of black settlement in Maine, and then specifically Bangor, the author could have presented her figures in a more succinct and less scattered way. Fortunately, Lee was able to clear up some of the confusion caused by too many numbers in one paragraph by providing a simple table of population and percentages (4). In this way, she more easily compared black populations to white, accounted for dates, and showed what her numbers were intended in a way much easier to grasp and understand (4). With the table present, it is unnecessary for her to repeat the information in text because it only serves to weaken the overall readability of her book. Chapter one also introduces the reader to a number of black Bangor residents whom Lee will refer back to throughout her book. After four chapters of names and families, especially without the direct benefit of chronological organization, the individuals easily become one mix of confusing references. Lee should have included an appendix in the back of her novel for reference, including each individual's job(s), address, income, spouse, children, and any known organizational links. Further along in the book, Lee discusses the specific regions, or wards, in Bangor that blacks settled. Taking this a step further, she disseminates which streets they lived on and the rent costs they paid. A small and insufficient map is provided to allow the reader to follow along this geographical journey (54). A larger map with actual readable street names would help to place the story characters, and make it a great deal easier to follow Lee's geographical discussion. For what Lee tries to address, she addresses little of what it truly meant to be black in a white dominated Bangor. Lee comes to the conclusion that Linda Brooks Daviss work at Union Station as a restroom attendant was relatively free of racism, and was in fact more split along class than racial boundaries. This analysis of experience is reached from personal testimony by Davis herself. Yet historians know that the memory is a tricky and often unreliable thing and that people will not disclose what they do not want others to know. It is also very relevant that Daviss testimony was part of a newspaper article written when she retired from Union Station, hardly a forum for her to discuss the racial ills of her work environment. The ultimate conclusion about racism and segregation is that military training camps during WWII brought segregation to Bangor, and that there was little racial trouble before then (108). Again, this is taken from an interview that was published as part of a book on the African American experience across the United States, and does not include any study of events throughout the course of the 1880-1950 period to illustrate or contradict the assumption of general racial peace in Bangor. Yet Lee gives hints here and there that all was not racially well in Bangor, Maine. For example, the black citizens were faced every day with racist caricatures of themselves used in film and advertising (81). Schools, though integrated, self-segregated, and the two races did not do a lot of social mixing, though it appears they thought favorably of one another (88 99-104). Additionally, as Lee points out, the black citizens had their own small NAACP chapter and kept updated on national events (120). It almost seems as if Lee wants to, at times, truly set apart the black Bangor population by isolating them and making them distinctly different from the rest of the African American population, as they seem so little impacted by racism and impervious to the social problems related to black life in America pre-civil rights. It is a shame also that her source limitations do not allow readers to know how foreign blacks settling in Maine maintained some of their own cultural traditions or institutions within the larger community since, as we know, the black community is not one unified group with the same interests and concerns. Lee recognizes the inadequacy of her sources best in her statement that they cannot replicate the breadth or the depth of the socially intimate experiences of African Americans at the time (87). Due to the limits of her sources, Lee is left to make a lot of conjecture about the people she studies and their daily lives. In some cases this is necessary and warranted when evidence points to it. In other cases, Lee stretches reality and assumption too far. It is not necessary to assume, for example, that Carrie Drymond was influenced by a certain advertisement for a stove in order to include in the book the interesting tidbit about the stove itself (75). To illustrate further, Lee assumes that relatively poorer African Americans used investments and tips from their jobs to supplement their

income in order to purchase into middle class luxury (80). There is simply no way for Lee to know this, or to be able to verify where the income was spent, especially because she is only looking at house rents and mortgages, not the totality of financial burden on one individual or family. Again, this is due to the scarceness of her sources, which afford her a very snapshot and small look at the individuals within the Bangor community. Making so many unsubstantiated claims negates the intellectual value of her more correct analyses such as when she postulated that the structure of the Maine school system might have limited the opportunities available to African American students (97). Lee is without a doubt fully engaged in the lives of the black Bangor population. The interviews she uses, the personal experiences she recounts, and the ways in which she brings life to a group of people for which there is little known about is fascinating. Despite the weaknesses inherent in the scant sources, the personalities of each individual come out to the forefront of her stories. This book would perhaps be a better depiction of the black Bangor experience if she had focused her book a bit on the people. It would have been a better read and just as informative if she had chosen to instead focus on just the people and let them speak for themselves. In that case, the book would have flowed along on a person-by-person basis and gain a cohesiveness that is not part of the book because it is written in such a way that it jumps around by date and person throughout the various topics. Lee was right when she said that there is little known about blacks in Bangor, and that there is indeed an historical void because there is little evidence left from which historians can create narratives.

Blacks have lived and worked in Maine as early as the seventeenth century, but historically have constituted less than one percent of Maines population. Probably for this reason, books on Blacks in New England have largely ignored the experience of African American Mainers. *Black Bangor* is the first major published study of a Black community in Maine. This tightly woven case study examines the African American community in Bangor during its heyday, 1880-1950, the period that saw an unprecedented migration of Blacks to that city. Blacks migrated to Bangor not just from other New England states, but from the Caribbean and Canadian Maritime Provinces as well, creating a heterogeneous community with roots in two hemispheres. Constituting an ultraminority in Bangor (according to the census, Blacks never numbered more than 300 souls during this period), this diverse community nonetheless came together to establish an impressive range of institutions, including local chapters of the NAACP and Odd Fellows, as well as of Mothers and Junior Mothers Clubs. Concentrated in an area known as the Parker Street neighborhood, Black women in Bangor became domestics and cooks, caterers and beauticians, clerks and stenographers. Men worked as loggers, teamsters, porters, chefs, and barbers; a few owned businesses. Organized thematically, with sections on migration, labor, daily life, and community, *Black Bangor*'s topics include not just migration patterns, work, and religious and cultural organizations, but also African American homes, furniture, clothing, and foodways. Elgersman Lee also examines race relations and depictions of Blacks in the local media, and draws comparisons between the experiences of Bangor's African American population and those of Blacks in other New England cities. This fascinating and exhaustive study will appeal to anyone from Maine, as well as those interested in African American history and the rich texture of the regions cultural life.

An important addition to our understanding of minorities in Maine and how they fared. Blacks... have been nearly invisible in recountings of the state's past... Lee has brought this small group to the fore in one city, showing how its members participated in economic life while preserving a sense of their own community. *Bangor Daily News*