

Representing Contemporary Immigrant and BIPOC Experiences through USM's Special Collections

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ABSTRACT

University of Southern Maine libraries contain two special collections that document communities that are traditionally underrepresented in historical narratives. The Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine documents the history of activism and diversity in Maine, focusing on African American, Jewish, and LGBTQ+ communities. The Franco-American Collection collects materials related to the culture and heritage of Maine's Franco-American population, those descended from French-Canadian immigrants. While both collections document immigrant experiences in Maine's history, they do not adequately represent contemporary Maine experiences. This article explores the work of understanding who we represent, who has access, and how we should respond to a developing landscape of interests and needs, and provide a roadmap for cultural heritage institutions to reach these goals as well.

INTRODUCTION

Maine is a special place with strong community bonds. So, too, our archives and collections are rooted in a strong sense of identity that defines who we are and embody the possibilities of what and who we can become. The specialized collections at University of Southern Maine (USM) reflect this spirit, connecting deeply with the local community. The documentary record at USM preserves and shares valuable materials that enhance research, foster creativity, and encourage social progress. Immigrants are vital contributors to Maine's community, but they are underrepresented in our archival collections. We aim to change this fact and ensure that their stories become an integral part of our shared history.

Archival materials are primary sources: information about history directly from those who experienced it. For this reason, materials in archives are unique and culturally and intellectually valuable. Providing public access to these materials is the primary function of archives. The stories in archival collections help us better understand the larger picture of history. Archivists create catalog records, give community presentations, teach students,

manage data online, and conduct outreach in our communities to help increase access to archival records. With access to these records, researchers can write academic papers and theses, create social media engagement, contribute to newspapers, create art and fiction, learn more about local history and people in their community, and so much more.

WORKFORCE DIVERSITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF TRAINING

In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "DEI: The Case for Common Ground," readers are reminded that actions speak louder than words.

"To create a community that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive, those in leadership positions have to take actions that actually further those goals—through their hiring and retention practices, the events to celebrate, the spaces to create for students, and who in their community they choose to honor" (Ryan 2023).

Library and information science education often does not focus on how to better serve those underrepresented, disadvantaged, and underserved by libraries and information infrastructure. Professional training program curricula have little focus on increasing diversity in the profession and responsiveness of the profession to the needs of diverse populations. Jaeger et al. (2011) argue that education initiatives have focused on trying to increase the presence of underrepresented and underserved groups without changing the curriculum to better reflect the needs of these groups or to prepare all librarians to be culturally competent. The article goes on to state that the definition of diversity should be expanded as should the "interventions" to assist diverse populations in information gathering. A wider definition of diversity is important for advancing a conversation in a tense and often-contested environment where the value of DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) is questioned.

A review of the literature in the field shows that academic libraries need to manage diversity initiatives in conversation with the campus community. Such activities could include providing online tutorials and research guides, enhancing outreach and collection development efforts, presenting exhibits and discussions, and collaborating with faculty. Forming partnerships with departments that focus on the issues of social justice and equality is a great starting point and highlights the need to engage with these ideas on campus. These conversations may also underscore the lack of diversity on our campuses and the importance of better reflecting the needs of the student population and of representing diverse voices.

Maine's immigrant and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) groups have both historical and contemporary ties to our communities, and though these groups are represented in our student body, they are not all represented in our collections. For example, in the 2022–2023 academic year, students from the Democratic Republic of Congo made up the largest group of students with immigrant origins at USM (Chakmakchi, 2024). Yet, immigrants from Francophone Africa are not featured in either the African American or in the Franco-American Collections. Chakmakchi's report states, "as of 2022, about 4% (56,419) of Maine residents were immigrants, and about 8% of all children under 18 were U.S.-born children (18,927) with at least one immigrant parent" (2024: 4). Chakmakchi extrapolates from first-generation student data that first- and second-generation students made up roughly 20 percent of USM's student body in AY 2022–23, and our collections should reflect this statistic.

MAINE'S DIVERSITY AND USM COLLECTIONS

Although it is well known that Maine is the whitest state in the nation (AP 2021), there are historical records of settlement by diverse groups that reach back centuries. For example, Africans came to Maine as mariners and fishermen in the 1600s (De Paoli 2006), as enslaved people during the colonial period (Barry 2006), and as settlers to 274 towns across all 16 counties, where many worked in transportation, hospitality, agriculture (Price and Talbot 2006). French Canadian immigrants began arriving in Maine before state boundaries were fixed, and a large influx of these immigrants came to Maine's industrial cities in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Maine's census records from the 1850s and 1860s include Eastern European Jews in Bangor and Waterville.¹ It is harder to pinpoint the beginning of

Queer history in Maine, but in the public eye, gay liberation began in the Bangor and Downeast area in the early 1970s with Steve Bull, Karen Bye, Sturgis Haskins, and other founders of the Wilde-Stein Club at University of Maine. Since 1974, the nation has looked to Maine as a leader for LGBTQIA2+² civil rights.

Because archives historically preserved the collections of people in the position to donate or sell their materials, collections abound with the materials of well-to-do white men. This may not have been a conscious choice on the part of the collectors, donors, or archives, but we believe it occurred as a result of institutionalized racism, sexism, and homophobia. Today, the profession is examining the gaps in collections and attempting to fill such gaps with information about previously excluded people and communities.

At USM, our special collections consist of some of the most valuable items the library owns, because we use them to connect in meaningful ways to these local communities. USM collections are spread across two campuses. In Portland, the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine holds three collections: the African American Collection, the Judaica Collection, and the LGBTQ+ collection. In Lewiston, the Franco-American Collection covers the Franco-American and French-Canadian immigrant communities. These collections show the contribution of African American, Franco-American, Jewish, and LGBTQIA2+ Mainers to the state's cultural, social, economic, and religious life over the past 200 years.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESSIBILITY (DEIA) IN ARCHIVES

When developing collections that cover the breadth, depth, and boundaries of a community or place, archivists look to community archives. The earliest definition of community archives included "collections that are sustained entirely independent of mainstream heritage institutions and those that receive support in some form from such organisations" (Flinn et al. 2009: 73). Other scholars limit the definition of community archives to only those independent autonomous grassroots efforts in which communities "document their own commonalities and differences outside the boundaries of formal mainstream institutions" (Caswell 2014: 31). Archivists, therefore, need to adopt a variety of cooperative approaches to support the equitable preservation of community history, to prevent this history from being lost for communities

with limited resources and competing priorities for their time and energies such as the pursuit of survival, rights, health, and education.

Cooperative approaches to community archives can be divided into three categories: community outreach, capacity building, and direct involvement of community members. Community outreach forms robust connections to community members through partnerships, participatory archiving events, digital collecting, and record-making activities. Capacity building primarily supports the development of independent community archives and includes resource sharing, skills sharing, and more formal educational programs, which can also support community members who wish to enter the profession. Direct involvement has traditionally involved volunteer labor (such as boards) and contingent labor (such as fellowships) for people with connections to underrepresented communities, but ideally, this important work takes the form of paid consulting and permanent professional positions.

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DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE COMMUNITY

Efforts to diversify collections by creating and maintaining community relationships are underway across the country. These relationships must be built on trust. Shayne et al. (2016: 15) assert that “researchers should not treat communities or organizations as locales from which we can extract information for our own professional advances.” When working with marginalized communities, community members must be valued as individuals, rather than as means to adding items in our collections. Outreach among communities can be conducted in various ways. Grimm and Noriega (2013) describe using surveys and community mapping to determine whom to reach out to about their project and to help them develop preliminary connections in the community. Lenstra and Alkalimat (2012) describe visiting local community hubs such as a specific church and a community center to alert

community members about their project, and to meet people interested in contributing. Grimm and Noriega’s project on Latinx art involved stakeholder meetings that “brought artists, arts leaders, archivists, and art historians for three-to-four hour discussions on preservation issues and brainstorming about key people, organizations, and events to be documented...meetings were also critical for building working relationships and clarifying the different outcomes each stakeholder needed for the collaborations to be meaningful” (Grimm and Noriega 2013: 101). These case studies also examine findings about what communities wanted from the archives. They held workshops on how to manage digital collections, in locations and at events already integrated in the fabric of the community (Lenstra and Alkalimat 2012) and found that their communities highly valued collections surveys, assistance in organizing their collections, and access to archival boxes and folders (Grimm and Noriega 2013).

CURRENT WORK AT USM

The Franco-American, African American, Judaica, and LGBTQ+ Collection advisory boards have been actively involved in connecting the collections, digitally and in-person, to the larger community in ways that stimulate activist roots. Connecting diverse collections through exhibits, new technologies, and new purposes has led us to view special collections through the lens of opportunity.

The Franco-American Collection started as a community archive in 1972. It was transferred to USM in 1989. Since the early days of the collection, community members have been involved on the board, teaching workshops, planning events, and soliciting archival donations. The collection has developed relationships with other local cultural organizations, such as L/A Arts, the arts agency for the cities of Lewiston and Auburn, and Maine MILL (Museum of Innovation Learning + Labor) in Lewiston. The Alliance Francaise du Maine will co-sponsor an event with the collection in spring 2025 called “Francophonie in Maine: Qu’est Ce C’est?,” a new yearly event bringing together French-speaking immigrants to discuss their experiences as French speakers in Maine. Leveraging relationships built by our board members, we are developing trust with Francophone African community leaders. These relationships will help us expand our audience and scope of representation.

The donation of civil rights leader Gerald E. Talbot's collection in 1995 prompted the creation of the African American Archives of Maine (as it was formerly called) and the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine. From 2019 to 2023, Dr. Lance Gibbs, Talbot Fellow for the Gerald E. Talbot and African American Collections, conducted research, curated online exhibits, and hosted talks under the title "We Exist: African-Americans in Maine." We also use other digital platforms to engage the general public in the depth and breadth of our collections. For example, staff created a virtual version of the Queer Bar tour and a virtual walking tour of Lewiston's key Franco heritage sites.

The LGBTQ+ collection has garnered the support of researchers and local organizations. As USM professor of sociology and women's and gender studies and faculty scholar for the LGBTQ+ collection, Wendy Chapkis has trained students in oral history techniques and matched them with local community members for interviews.³ Library staff were also engaged in hosting a Big Queer Historical Bar Tour, using the LGBTQ+ collection to chart a historical walking tour of Portland's Queer bars.

USM's special collections staff members are professionally engaged in local and national professional associations as well as being founding members of Maine Contemporary Archives (MCA), established in 2020. MCA is a statewide group that focuses on resource sharing and capacity building around digital collections, in pursuit of its mission to "foster collaboration to collect, preserve, and provide access to materials related to Maine community members' experiences of current events."⁴ Our staff understand the opportunity in building a collection that is inclusive of growing populations in southern Maine.

FUTURE WORK AT USM

USM is committed to connecting with our diverse community. We are seeking grant opportunities to enhance our community impact. Grants help us leverage the work of community leaders, those better equipped to speak to and among their own communities. At present we are focused on federal funding, particularly through the Institute for Museum and Library Services, to bring our community together to determine what they are looking for in an archival collection. Grant funding provides the opportunity to pay for the time and labor of community partners needed to achieve these goals.

Our community partners can help mobilize, organize, and leverage specific immigrant communities to better amplify their work and their voices.

USM is creating a framework to better conduct this work, and for this work, we need staff who represent the populations we serve. We are conducting a BIPOC library symposium so that diverse staff in the field can network, and interested BIPOC community members can better learn about options for working in libraries. We would like to explore possibilities of a graduate library and information science degree program in Maine, workforce training, credentialing, and other opportunities.

We are currently gauging interest in community archives in immigrant communities through our Living & Learning in Maine series. Living & Learning in Maine: New Mainers Creating a Home, is a creative workshop series about print culture, history, immigration, and the arts, hosted by University of Southern Maine Libraries with support from the California Rare Book School, Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition, and the Kate Cheney Chappell '83 Center for Book Arts. The events pair art/creative workshops with Maine's immigration past and present, through the lens of archives, print culture, and education, with the goal of building community and the documentary record. The creative work of attendees will be printed in a small booklet distributed to participants.

CONCLUSION

In seeking to partner with the communities we serve, our goal is not to increase the size of our collections, nor is it to make the documentary evidence in our collections conform to a rough idea of the shape of human activity in our region, which would likely be subject to social and institutional biases. We will be successful in our efforts at equitable representation if we maintain robust community connections that support the preservation of documentary evidence that is most relevant to the people we serve. Our success is dependent on the paid participation of community members and our ability to share our professional expertise with those who want to make use of it, with minimal barriers to access. Finally, we measure our success through the use of primary sources by students and researchers toward not just a scholarly understanding of history, but in service to the continued maintenance and development of the communities and fields of activity that make Maine special.

NOTES

- 1 For more information, see "Population of Maine Jews: 1860–2019" <https://www.mainejews.org/census.php>
- 2 LGBTQIA2+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or sometimes questioning), intersexual, asexual, and two-spirited.
- 3 "Querying the Past" oral histories are available online: https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/querying_ohproject/.
- 4 <https://ourmainearchives.omeka.net/>

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Zachary Newell is dean of libraries and learning at the University of Southern Maine, providing leadership through collaboration and coordination of three campus libraries in Portland, Gorham, and Lewiston. Newell provides leadership and support for a team that includes Learning Support, the Writing Center, and most recently support for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) and support for community engagement. He is interested in the future of academic libraries and talks and researches about it frequently. He is currently cochair of a USM AI task force.

Jill Piekut Roy is the special collections librarian at the University of Southern Maine. She leads instruction, technical services, and reference for the university's archives, manuscript collections, rare book collections and the collections of the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine. She has worked in academic, public, museum, and historical society libraries, and serves on the Maine Historical Records Advisory Board.