



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (KK) Kate Kruckemeyer, ()

Accession Numbers:

KK-03-01-FN

Fieldnotes

- - -C

Audio recordings

- - -CS

Photographic documentation

- - -M

Additional materials

Initial Contact: 4/18/2003 Contact Date: 4/25/2003

Related Accession Numbers: - - - - -

Individual/Group/Event: <u>Dr. Cecelia Gross</u>	
Address: <u>Springfield Technical Community College, One Armory Square</u>	
City: <u>Springfield</u>	Zip: <u>01105</u> County: <u>Hampden</u>
Phone: Daytime: <u>[REDACTED]</u>	Evening: _____
E-mail: <u>[REDACTED]</u>	Website: _____
Contact person: _____	
Title: <u>Professor of History</u>	

Location of Interview: <u>her office, [REDACTED]</u>	
Street Address: <u>as above</u>	
City: _____	Zip: _____ County: _____

Special Needs (including translation):
--

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): <u>history of African Americans in Springfield, particularly the black church</u>
--

Traditions noted for follow-up:

Other Possible Contacts: <u>Pastor Wesley, Lujuana Hood, Mason Square Business Partnership, Mrs. Luora Graves Webb, Harambee, etc.</u>
--

Summary Description: Directions to STCC:

Professor Gross is widely acknowledged as an expert on the history of Springfield's African American community. She has taught for 20 years at Springfield Technical Community College and also conducted a great deal of research on local history. Dr. Gross came to Springfield about 20 years ago after living and working in a number of places around the world including teaching at Howard University in Washington, D.C.; teaching in Africa; and teaching at Simon's Rock College of Bard and researching local history in the Berkshires [while she left Pittsfield two decades ago, she also has done a great deal of historical research about African Americans in the Berkshires, much of which is collected at the Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield, and might be of some assistance if we are seeking background information on that community]. Dr. Gross downplays her knowledge of current arts and culture in Springfield by noting that she is not a native and that she is by temperament not "a joiner"—however she did provide me with many good leads and has a wealth of historical information which would contextualize our research here.

Dr. Gross's research encompasses the history of black life in the Greater Springfield area from 1636 to the present. She is in the process of creating a website which she hopes will go online in Fall of 2003 on the history of blacks in Springfield, complete with many primary documents including interviews; the website will be linked to the website of the Springfield Armory National Historic Site (<http://www.nps.gov/spar/>), for whom she has done research on black armory workers.

She noted the following as libraries that have strong collections on African Americans in Western Massachusetts: W.E.B. DuBois's papers at U.Mass, the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum in Springfield, and the Library in Stockbridge (on the Berkshires). Also, the CVHM has a number of good videos on Springfield's black community, including one she produced called (I think) "They Came North to Springfield," and also a video on the history of Springfield's black churches.

She noted that the most important center for culture in Springfield's black community (as with most black communities) is "the church." For most people, this is not only the religious center but also a

social, cultural, and political center. There were black congregations in Springfield as early as the 1840s, although many more started around the time of the Civil War. Prior to that time, blacks and whites worshipped together in Springfield.

St. John's is probably the highest profile church among African Americans, although there are many others of importance. The current pastor of St. John's, Howard-John Wesley, has brought in many more young congregants and is widely noted (by others I have talked to as well as Dr. Gross) as being an important person to speak with to understand the community. St. John's does have a gospel choir.

Dr. Gross has done much work with the Pan African Historical Museum, and recommended I speak with its director, Lujana Hood [REDACTED]. The Museum houses much of Dr. Gross's research material. Ms. Hood is very involved in local organizations including churches and neighborhood groups. She and Dr. Gross provide living history programs for local school kids on black history.

If we want to know about black businesses, we should speak with the Mason Square Business Partnership (The Association, Inc.: Mason Square Business Partnership, 172 Eastern Ave., Springfield, MA 01109, (413) 734-2450; director: Frederick Hurst; <http://www.assocmasonsquarebus.com/index.html>). The Mason Square District is described in their website as "The State Street corridor, Eastern Avenue, Six corners and Hancock Street"—all areas just east (and somewhat south) of STCC and the Armory. Some of the businesses they work with are culturally related, including restaurants and beauty salons.

Dr. Gross also mentioned three community groups as important contacts: The Urban League; Dunbar Community Center; and The Martin Luther King Center.

--Dunbar in particular would be a good place to ask about double dutch, since they do lots of sports with kids

--both Dunbar and MLK do lots of cultural and artistic things with kids and also focus on college advising

Besides "the church," Dr. Gross said that the other major institutions in the black community are "the barbershop, the beauty parlor, and the pool hall"—all of which are the site of important cultural and political negotiations and learning. She knows there are a number of beauty shops and barbershops that cater to African Americans in the Mason Square area. She mentioned in particular:

--The Uptowne Beauty Salon at 302 Hancock Street

--when I drove by the Uptowne, I noticed that it is next to Six Corners Barbers, which looks like a very traditional establishment with a barber's pole

--also on my drive from STCC to the Uptowne, I passed Bill Brown's House of Beauty on Walnut Street and next to it, Diane Brown's Beauty Shop

I asked about a number of other women's cultural traditions, including quilting and whether anyone locally made hats for church, and Dr. Gross said that a good person to talk to would be Mrs. Luora Graves Webb. Mrs. Webb, now 76, is a life-long Springfield resident and the first black woman to be president of the Springfield Golden Age Club. She is also a student at STCC and a member of the Baptist church. Dr. Gross thought Mrs. Webb could provide some insight into whether these and other traditions were being carried on. Mrs. Webb can be reached at [REDACTED]

I also asked about whether there are social dance events and/or step dancing by alumni of black fraternities and sororities. Dr. Gross suggested asking Mrs. Webb or the Urban League. She does not think that local colleges have black fraternity chapters.

Important festive/cultural events:

Harambee Festival

Organized by Harambee Worldwide, Inc., a local group who organized to bring back the traditional community celebration of Harambee that had been popular for many years in the community.. Their mailing address is C/O Angela Banton, PO Box 91212, Springfield, MA 01139. Their website is: <http://www.harambeeworldwide.com/index.htm>. Harambee takes place in late August at Stafford Park.

The Ebony Fashion Show

This is the local appearance of the annual fashion show organized by Ebony Magazine. Dr. Gross believes that the fashions are all high fashion designers from New York, Paris, and the like, but that the production of the event is an important local undertaking, and that attendance is a major event in the Springfield social calendar. This event takes place every fall, and she believes that people at Dunbar would know more.

Addenda:

Also on my drive along Walnut Street I passed:

--The Juncos and Cavey Restaurant and The Island Kitchen West Indian Restaurant

--Botanica San Lorenzo, whose window display gave the impression that Caribbean religious and/or traditional medicinal activities would be supported by the store